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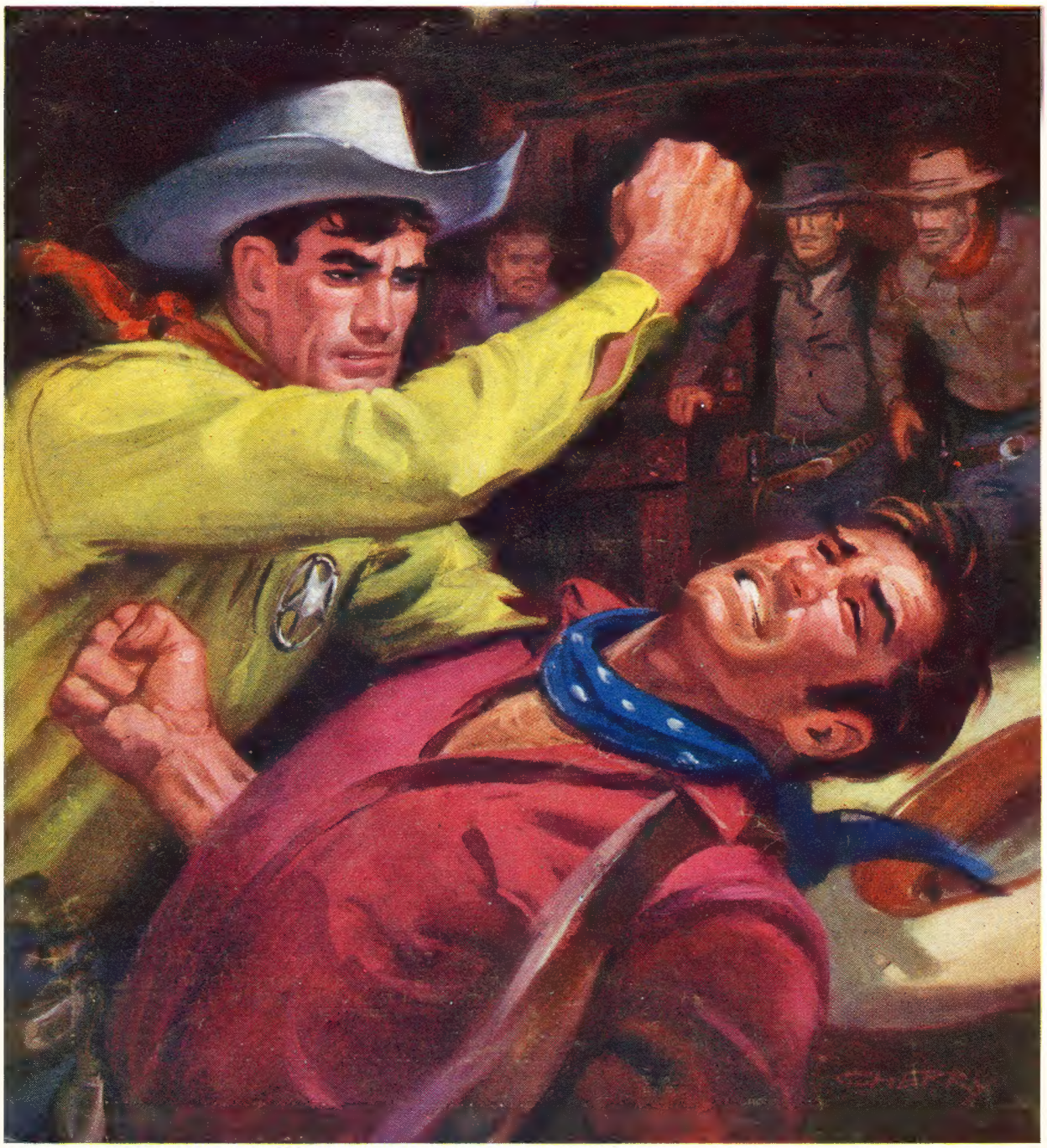
TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



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A JIM HATFIELD ACTION NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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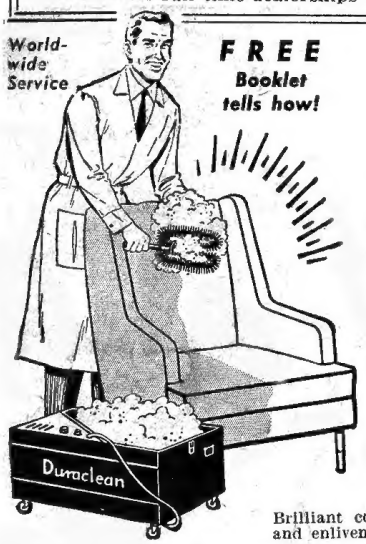
Alert dealers can average $5 hourly gross profit on service they render plus $3 on EACH service-man at National Price Guide charges. This business is easy to learn . . . quickly established.



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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 66, No. 1 MARCH, 1957

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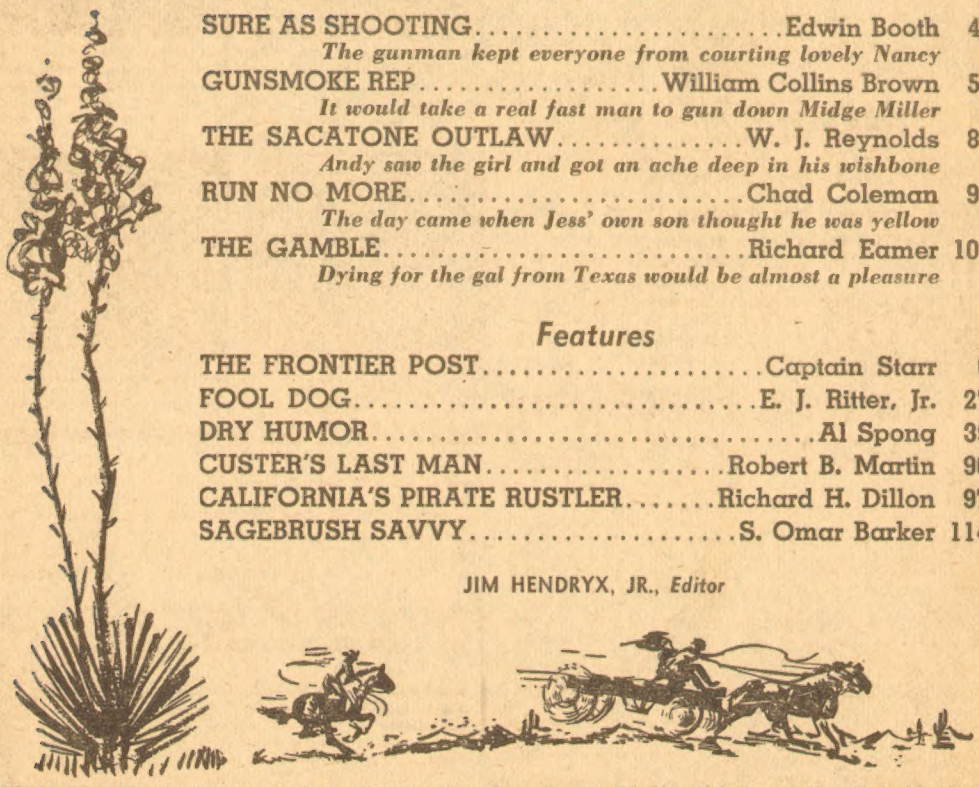

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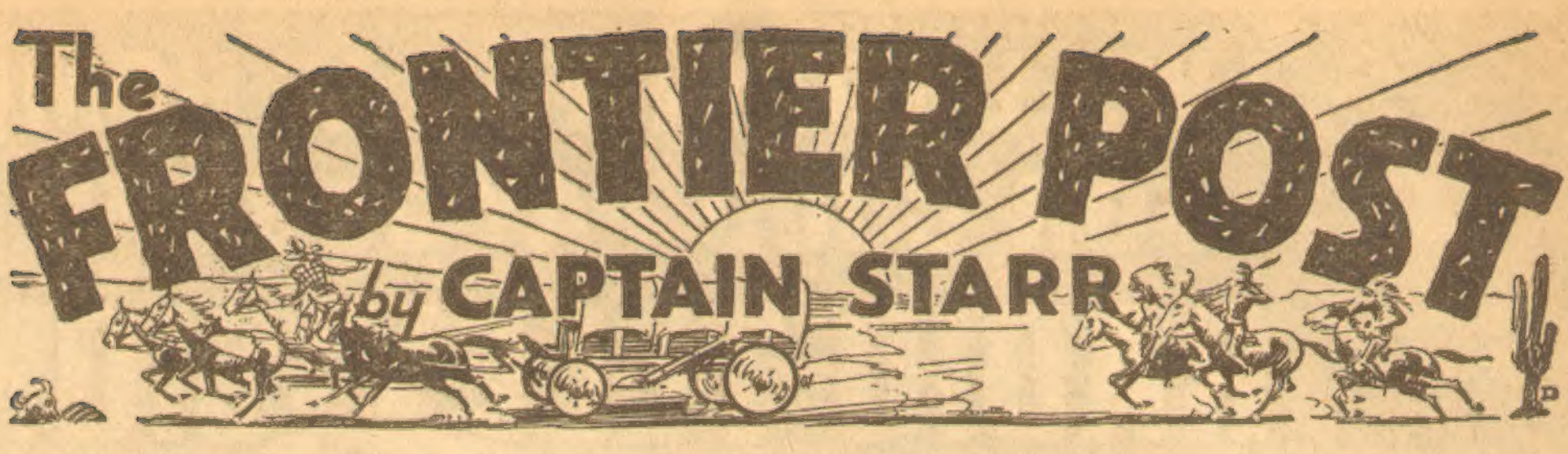

STANDING ROOM ONLY

BRITT Bailey should have been governor of Kentucky. Instead, he wound up an outlaw. But though he never ranked with such owlhoots as Billy The Kid, Jesse James, Murietta and such like, he got the kind of burial every owlhoot dreamed of getting but never did.

Before he hit the dark trail, Britt Bailey was a promising politician in Kentucky. But he punctured this respectable career at the same time he lost his temper on the floor of the state legislature and used a derringer to blast a rival politico. Bailey dusted out of Kentucky pronto and headed for Texas. Here, he set about mobilizing a small army of gunmen who, like himself, were one jump ahead of the sheriff.

The Britt Bailey gang whipped the Texas Rangers and several contingents of Mexican troopers during their larcenous and bloody career. Bailey had himself a fairly well-disciplined outfit, considering the nature of his recruits, except for one man who was a constant thorn in the gang leader's side.

One day Bailey and this man, Clyde Smith, got into a hassle over whether or not to plunder emigrant wagon trains. Bailey vetoed the suggestion; Smith was all for it. Finally, Bailey told Smith to get out. Smith got, but before departing he left a note in which he promised to settle accounts at the first opportunity. Bailey read the note and snorted contemptuously.

Following Texas' victorious bid for freedom, Bailey holstered his guns, disbanded his gang and made a new bid for respectability by announcing his candidacy for president of the new-born Texas Republic. When the votes were all in, Bailey felt considerably deflated. He had received exactly one vote—his own.

As he mounted and rode out of town, a defeated man, he was followed by a crowd who jeered and hooted at the ex-politician, ex-bandit leader. Leading the chorus of boos and catcalls was Clyde Smith, the same man who had sworn to square accounts with his one-time boss.

Deciding that now was as good a time as any, Smith mounted his own horse and followed Bailey out of town. The two men met at a big oak tree on the country road a mile outside of town. "I been waitin' quite a spell for this, Bailey," said Smith, a triumphant smirk on his face. "Draw!"

Both men went for their guns and pure hell broke loose. The gunfire was so intense that the volleys shook leaves from the tree. By the time the desperate gun duel was over both men had had it. Each man had an even dozen bullets in him!

When the sheriff and his deputies rode out to investigate, they found Clyde Smith sprawled on his face in the dust, very dead. But Britt Bailey, blood streaming from a dozen wounds in his body was still standing! He stood, clutching at the oak, stubbornly refusing to fall even though he was literally dead on his feet.

"Guess I showed him," he gasped as the lawmen approached. Then, looking at the sheriff through rapidly dimming eyes, he whispered, "Do me a favor, Sheriff. Like for you to bury me like—like this—standing up!"

And that was just the way they did bury him. They lowered Britt Bailey's body into a grave by means of a windlass. The grave contained wooden props that would keep him standing till the Day of Resurrection. Buried with him was his rifle, oiled and loaded, propped on his shoulders, a jug of bourbon at his feet and he was dressed in a fine broadcloth suit—the same suit in which he had confidently expected to be inaugurated president.

And there he stands today (or so claim the Texans), the only owlhoot who was ever buried as he died—standing straight up in his boots.

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him* or *her your ideas?* That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you* how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

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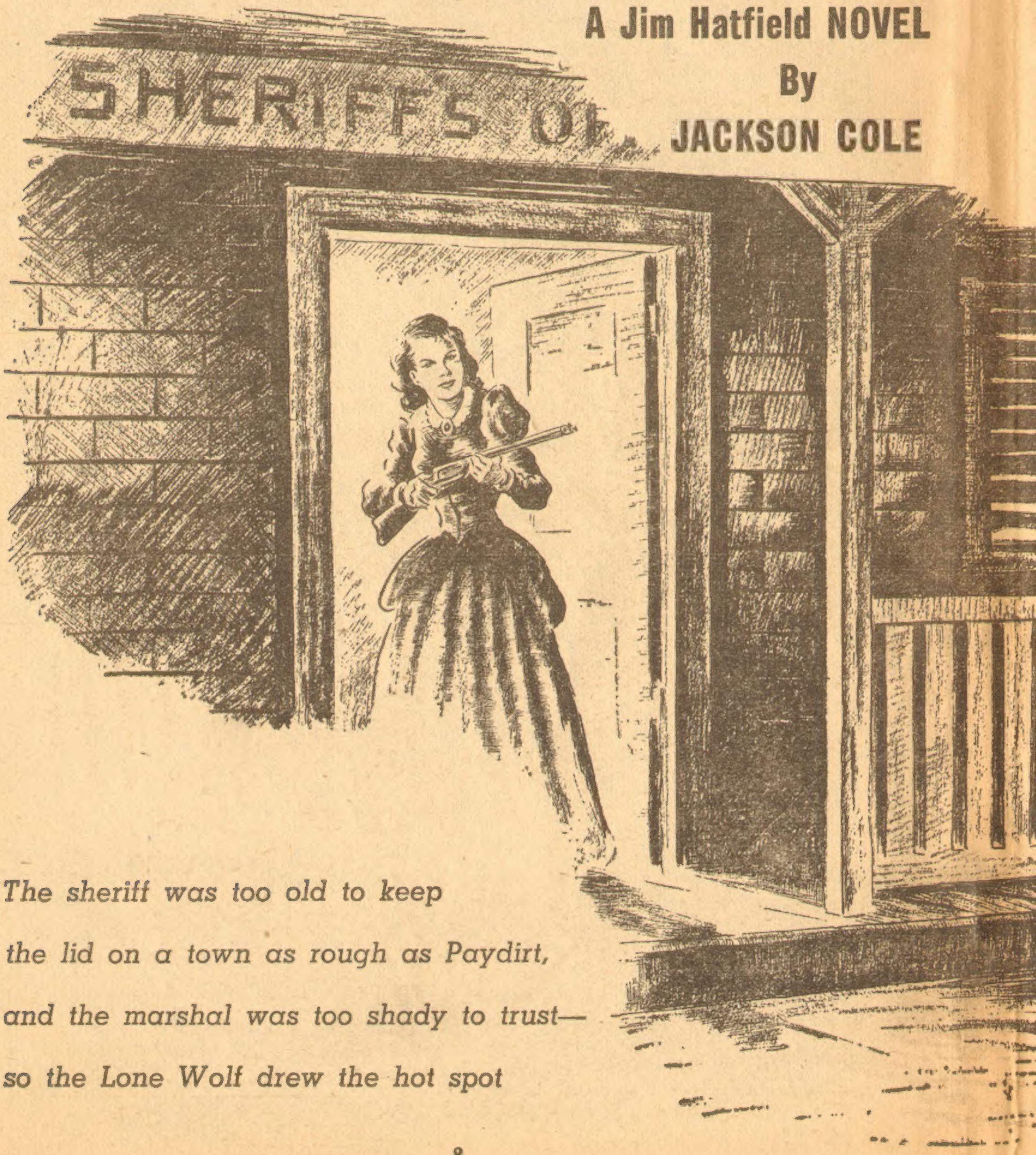
The IRON FIST

A Jim Hatfield NOVEL

By

JACKSON COLE



The sheriff was too old to keep

the lid on a town as rough as Paydirt,

and the marshal was too shady to trust—

so the Lone Wolf drew the hot spot

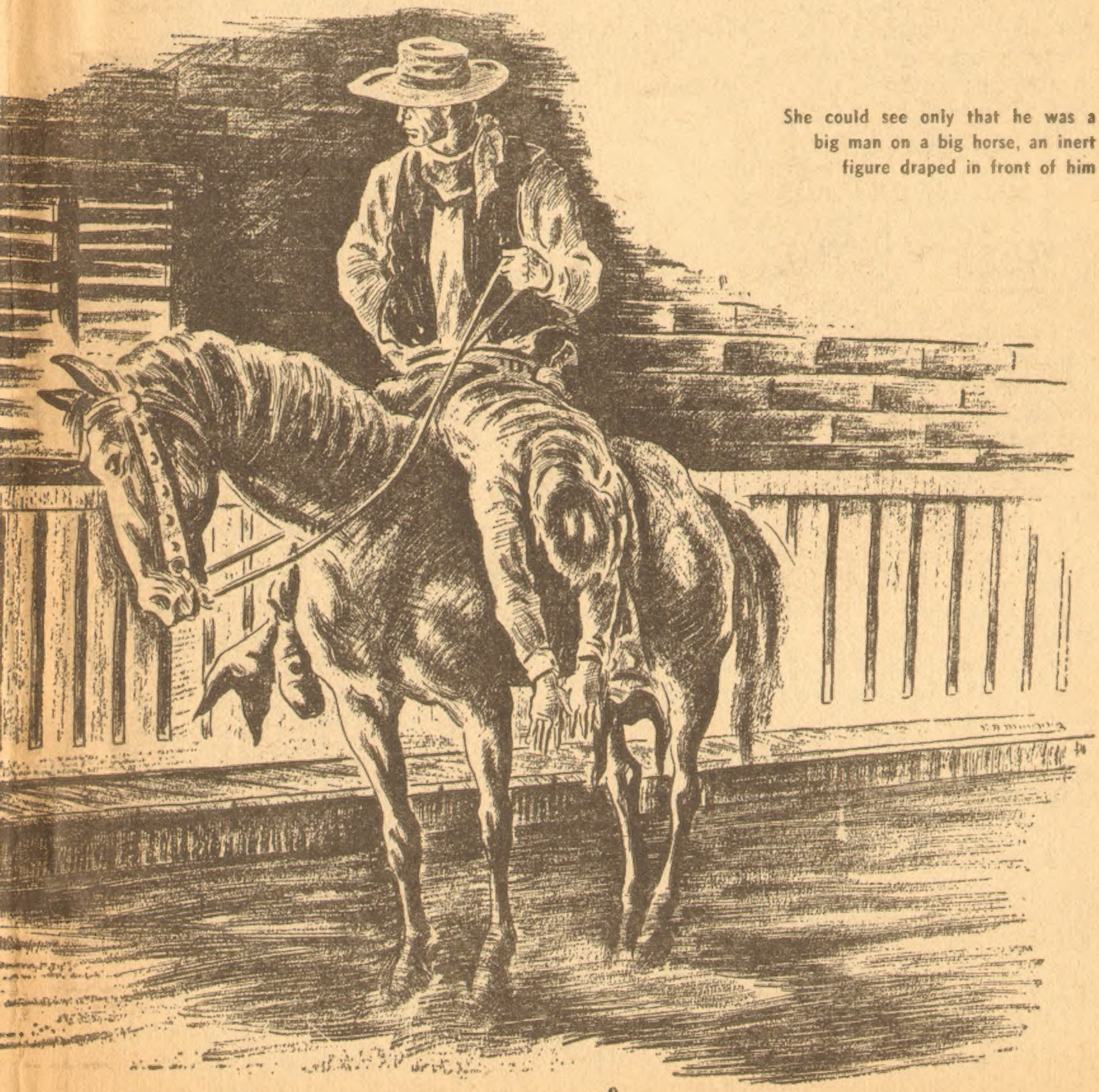
CHAPTER I

Death in the Afternoon

GOLDY'S warning snort caught Jim Hatfield in the middle of the spring-fed-pool. The big Ranger was floating on his back, enjoying the water's coolness after a long hot ride. He heard the big stud's sudden snort of alarm and he flipped over like a startled seal and headed with powerful strokes for the willow-shaded bank where he had shed his dusty clothes.

He didn't make it in time.

The man who crouched in the thin striped shade of the drooping trees whirled at the sound of Jim's splashing. He had been going through Hat-



She could see only that he was a big man on a big horse, an inert figure draped in front of him

field's clothes—he spun around now, facing the Lone Wolf, and he had one of Jim's big Peacemakers in his right hand.

The hammer made an audible click as he thumbed it back. His fleshy face was drawn, sweat-streaked, and his breathing was labored as though he had been running in the sun.

"Stay easy, mister!" the stranger snarled. "I'm not after your skin! I just want to borrow this gun and your horse—"

He was backing away as he talked. The willows whispered to the passing of a stray breeze and he jerked a quick glance toward the rock-strewn slope down which he had come.

He was afraid of someone, Jim thought. And he was just nervous enough to use that Colt at any sudden movement.

Hatfield stood up. He was about six feet from the bank and the water reached just below his armpits. Sunlight made its broken pattern on the small pond that was surrounded by the stony hills; it reflected upward across his broad, muscled chest and his eyes seemed to light with a deep green fire. He appraised the obviously harrassed prowler with a regard that held a hint of wry humor at his own predicament.

The man backing toward Goldy was middle-aged, ruddy-faced and soft-bodied. A brown trimmed mustache made a neat line under a rather heavy, bulbuous nose which held the small indentions made by steel-rimmed spectacles, but he was not wearing them now. He was dresed in soiled whipcord britches and a gray twill shirt. He was bareheaded, and where his thinning brown hair had receded from his forehead the sun had stamped its red brand.

He was moving crabwise along the bank, keeping the Colt levelled at the Ranger. Goldy threw up his head and eyed the stranger with unfriendly regard.

"I'll leave him at Jacob's Stables in Paydirt," the man said. His voice was hurried, uncertain. He licked his lips and paused to reach in a hip pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his sweaty face. "Hate to do this to you, mister. But I need this animal more than you do right now. You'll find him in Jacob's—and I'll pay you well for the loan."

He reached Goldy's side and glanced down at the saddle Hatfield had dropped by the base of the willow. Discouragement spread across his soft face. He stared hard at Jim, at the saddle, and the Lone Wolf could almost see his mind working, wondering how he could saddle the big sorrel and still keep Hatfield at bay.

He got the blanket over Goldy's back first, talking gently to the big stallion. He managed this with one hand, but there was haste pushing him and he worked nervously.

Goldy let the stranger work on him, he was rigid, eyeing the Lone Wolf, waiting for a signal from his master.

"Nice animal," the thief said sincerely. "Gentle, too." He was awkard as he lifted the saddle with one hand and tried to toss it over Goldy's back. He didn't have the strength to do it.

"Better use both hands, mister," Jim advised easily.

The man flushed. But he decided to take a chance. He thrust Jim's Peacemaker inside his waistband and heaved the saddle over the stallion's back, then he clawed at the gun again, drawing it and swinging around to face the big Ranger.

Hatfield had made no move.

"Thanks," the thief muttered. He licked his lips again as he turned, tightened the cinches and lifted his left foot into stirrup. Goldy was like a statue, ears pricked forward, waiting for Hatfield to tell him what to do.

The man lifted himself into saddle. "Look me up at the Canyon House," he called to the Ranger. "I'l make this up to you. The name is Irvan Ram—"

The rifle shot cut him off. The whiplash of the .30-30 explosion echoed sharply among the rocky hills bordering the small pond.

IRVIN sagged over Goldy's shoulder. The big sorrel whirled with the shot and the man slid off, limp as a sack of meal

—he fell with a sodden thud.

Jim made the bank with the shot still echoing in the hills. His long-muscled naked body flashed in the sun. He made a run for Goldy who came to meet him. The second rifle shot came high, whipping through the drooping branches of the willow.

The Lone Wolf slid his rifle from

JIM HATFIELD

Goldy's saddle scabbard and slapped the stallion on the rump. "Get out of sight, boy!" he said and lunged ahead for the slim protection of the foot-thick willow trunk.

The shots had come from the rocky ridge a hundard yards south of the pond, the same ridge down which the man called Irvin had come. Jim levered a shell into firing position as he hugged the tree. He was counting on the dappled pattern of shadow and sunlight to screen him from the rifleman on the ridge.

There were two of them on the slope, partially hidden by towering gray rocks which seemed to grow out of the dun-colored earth. One of them was standing tall in stirrups of a claybank horse, sighting down the muzzle of his rifle. He was wearing a high-crowned gray Stetson and his dark woolen shirt made a contrast against the rocks. The other, visible only for a moment, was riding for cover behind another rock upthrust.

Jim's quick shot, ricocheting off the rock face a foot from the claybank rider's face, startled him. He jerked as he pulled trigger and his bullet whipped high over Jim's head. The Lone Wolf's eyes had a deadly glint as he figured Kentucky windage and slammed another shot up at the rifleman.

The rider twisted and his next shot went straight up in the air. He fell forward on the claybank's neck, his left hand clutching at the long mane. Something fell from his shirt pocket, something that glinted in the sunlight, then the claybank, at his urging, was wheeling, lunging back among the rocks.

His companion fired once, but he was guessing at Jim's position, and his shot was wide. Jim laid three fast shots among the rocks where the man's smoke showed, the slugs ricocheting and whining in the hot sunlight. The explosions bounced among the rocky hills and finally faded. Then Jim caught the faint drum of hoofs heading south, receding.

He settled back against the willow and took a deep breath and the smile that crinkled his lips was hard and with little humor.

"Sure caught me with my pants down," he muttered. And then, remembering the horsethief who had tried to get away on Goldy, he turned and walked to him.

The man lay sprawled in the sun, just beyond the shade of the willow. Blood made a dark, spreading stain under his left arm. His breathing was barely perceptible, but the Lone Wolf saw that he

was still alive.

Hatfield knelt beside the man. He was on his back, staring up at the hot blue sky. He became aware of Jim's presence slowly, as though he was returning from far away. His pale blue eyes focussed with an effort.

"Get Spenser—" he said. His chest rose and his lips moved slowly, forcing the words. "Get Doc Spenser."

Jim's eyes held a fleeting compassion. It was too late for a doctor —

The man's breath went out in a choked gurgle. He lay still in the sun, staring up at the sky with unseeing eyes.

Jim looked him over. He saw the raw red welts around the man's wrists and this suddenly made the pattern clear. Whoever he was, this man had been held prisoner somewhere, no doubt by the two riflemen who had come looking for him. Obviously he had escaped them, and judging from the sunburn on his forehead he had been afoot and running since morning.

That much Hatfield was sure of—but who this man was, and why he had been held prisoner were beyond the pattern of the big Ranger's thinking. It was a job for the local sheriff, and a bleak frown marred the cold clearness of Hatfield's green eyes as he suddenly thought of the man.

He pulled his thoughts back to the present as Goldy came up, stepping deliberately, neck arched in curiousity.

Jim straightened. He stepped over Irvin's body and picked up his Colt which the man had dropped as he fell from the saddle and turned to the sorrel who was sniffing at the body.

"He's dead, Goldy," Hatfield muttered. "Made a pretty poor horsethief. I was going to let him get settled in saddle before giving you the word to dump him. But they beat me to it."

Goldy looked toward the ridge and nodded and Jim grinned briefly as he went back for his clothes. He dressed and buckled his gun belts about his flat waist and walked back to the stallion standing by the body. He picked up the Winchester he had laid down beside the dead man and reloaded the magazine with fresh cartridges from a box he carried in his saddle bag.

Captain Bill McDowell's ace lieutenant was a careful man—he had to be. From the bayou country of east Texas to the badlands of the Big Bend his name was legend.

He was a tall shadow riding the narrow, unswerving path of law and order and a grim destiny allowed him no mistakes. He rode without looking for trouble, but always ready for it, and knowing always that he would come to it.

Goldy shifted and then stood still and patient as Jim lifted the dead man across his saddle.

"Let's take a look on the ridge," Jim said, and Goldy moved that way with no further urging.

Hatfield rode up to the rocks where the claybank rider had stood in his stirrups to fire. He saw the brass casings of a .30 caliber rifle, a common enough weapon in this country, and stepped down to pick them up.

No unusual markings stood out, but he noticed the drops of blood on the flat stone a few steps away and near it a small mouth organ glinted.

The Lone Wolf picked it up, noticing the German name stamped on it. He thought of the man who had dropped it and the reflection that the killer would probably not be in the mood for music for some time brought a glint of hard laughter to his eyes.

He dropped the harmonica into his pocket and stepped up into saddle again. He crested the ridge and looked back, the clear cold pool below looked like molten brass in the afternoon sun.

Ahead of him, to the southwest the land stretched rocky and desolate, rising to meet the first granite rises of the Anvils. A narrow trail came out of the east and faded in the direction of a canyon pass through the hills.

The town of Paydirt lay in that direction, and that was where the Lone Wolf was headed. . .

CHAPTER II

Man on the Ropes

DEVIL'S CREEK made a booming noise in the darkness, filling the night with its presence. A chill wind slid down off the granite peaks that shone a ghostly white in the moonlight and whistled through Paydirt's twisted streets.

Down by the warehouse section a freight was making up for its run up the twenty-six twisting, torturous miles of Devil's Canyon to the Lucky Strike mine on the shoulder of Big Lars peak. The Mallet engine's patient hissing competed with the wind and the booming from the river. But it was neither of these sounds which brought the girl to the door of the small, red brick building facing Cold Street.

The sign over the door read: SHERIFF'S OFFICE. It had been built during Paydirt's earlier boom, when this Texas town had seemed destined to stand with Dallas and Houston as a growing metropolis, only to fade quickly when the strikes petered abruptly.

Paydirt was booming again, but it was a mild boom this time. It had come at a time when the town had all but given up hope and Paydirt's optimism was tinged now with the stabilizing factor of skepticism. There was no telling how long the new strike at the Lucky Strike would keep paying off, and Paydirt would live and die on this answer.

Laura Soltight turned to face the bridge across Devil's Creek. Paydirt had grown up on this side of the canyon—the newer section across the Creek had been spawned by the reopening of the Lucky Strike mine.

The wind carried the faint yells of a crowd, rising and fading in a rhythm that held bitter meaning to her. She listened, stiff and fearful, and each swell of sound shook her as though someone slapped her face.

Behind her the office was empty. Her father's pipe was on his desk, the bowl still warm—and filling her thoughts was the memory of her brother, Rick's white, taut face.

She didn't hear the rider who came up out of the shadows.

"Evening, ma'am," said a masculine voice, politely.

Laura jerked around. She reached her right hand around the door jamb for the shotgun she had placed there and brought the weapon up in a swift, decisive gesture that showed familiarity with its deadliness.

The rider standing just out of the splash of lamplight from the office was a big man—that much she could distinguish. She could make out the spread of wide shoulders tapering to lean waist, but the face shadowed by a tilted Stetson was hidden from her probing glance. He was sitting easily in saddle of a magnificent golden stallion.

There was a figure draped across the saddle in front of this man, but Laura saw only a shapeless shadow and it meant nothing to her. She had come to feel, through bitter experience, that all strangers were hostile and she brought the twin muzzles up now to cover this big man.

Neither man nor horse moved at the threat of the shotgun in her hands. But a dry amusement crept into the rider's soft voice.

"Can you direct me to Sheriff Soltight's office, ma'am?"

Laura peered closer at the man, trying to measure the silent figure behind the brush jacket protecting him from the bitter wind. The darkness hid his face, but she didn't miss the bone-handled Colts which jutted from tied down holsters on his hips and instinctively she tightened her grip on the shotgun.

Another one, she thought despairingly, and fear added its weight to the depression in her. Another killer riding in to Paydirt drawn by rumors of gold and easy pickings.

"This is the sheriff's office," she an-

swered coldly.

The tall man looked her over with detached appraisal. "My mistake," he said gently. "I thought the sheriff was a man."

She flushed. "The sheriff is my father."

The tall man smiled. "Is he in?"

She made a slight motion with the shotgun toward the plank bridge. A wild, sustained roar came to them at this moment and she winced, seeing in her mind's eyes the cruelty that was behind the crowd's concerted cry.

"He's across the river," she said grimly. "With my brother, Rick."

The rider glanced toward the light-splotched darkness of the new section. The shadows hid the small frown in his eyes. "Where will I find him?"

"In the *Golden Nugget.*" Bitterness crept unconsciously into the girl's tone. "But I wouldn't advise you to look for him there."

The rider's smile held a bleakness she did not see. "Thank you, Miss Soltight," he murmured. He touched his hat brim as he turned the big stallion aside.

JUDGING from the sound, most of Paydirt was concentrated in the Golden Nugget tonight. It spilled out into the raw and windy street and Hatfield frowned, trying to judge the temper of that roar. It was a spectator's cry, but there was a wild, bloodthirsty ring to it, a hungry savagery in the swelling upbursts that puzzled him.

No ordinary entertainment drew forth this roar from the crowd, Jim reflected. Then, remembering another day long past when he had watched a slim girl face a charging murietta bull armed only with a cape and a slender blade, he straightened in saddle. The roar of the crowd had the same ring in it—there was the smell of blood in the sound!

He turned Goldy across the street, swerving past a huge, high-sided wagon pulled by a six horse team. The driver yelled a curse at him as he lumbered by and turned to look back at Jim and the limp figure across Goldy's saddle. But in the night the dead man was only a shapeless figure and Jim a passing shadow.

The Lone Wolf found a spot in the rack two doors past the Golden Nugget. He was curious about what was going on inside the big gambling hall, but he wanted to see the sheriff, too. The body he had brought in to Paydirt was the sheriff's responsibility and Hatfield had his own reasons for wanting to meet the county lawman.

He dismounted and left Goldy at the rack and pushed through the crowd clustered around the gambling hall doors. The men resented his passage, but they let him through. Those who turned with scowling temper let oaths die on their lips at sight of the impressive figure cut by the tall, cold-eyed Ranger.

The Golden Nugget was big, brightly lighted by a half dozen imitation crystal chandeliers. The first thing Hatfield noticed was the spangled, tight-skirted girls lining the bannister of the second floor staircase. They were pressed against the mahogany railing, staring down into the middle of the crowd, eyes sparkling with excitement.

One of them shrilled: "Kill him, Packy! Break his jaw!"

Jim shouldered toward the long bar. He found a place at the rail and turned to watch the center of the excitement just as it came to an end.

Under the bright lights of the center chandeliers a fight ring had been roped off. There was only one strand connecting the four wobbly posts and it sagged now to the weight of the man sprawled across it.

He was a big, strong-looking youngster with a cornmeal yellow cowlick coming down over his bloodied face. His features were a distorted, swollen mask. His lips were parted in strained, terrible grimace as he pawed with an ineffectual left hand at the bull-chested, swarthy man standing over him.

The darker-skinned fighter had a bruise high on one cheek, but otherwise was unmarked. His taped hands flashed out, sinking with meaty thunk into the blond man's quivering side. Around the makeshift ring the yells of the motley crowd

Hatfield's long-barreled Peacemaker jabbed rudely into Lengo's stomach

rode high.

Jim watched the ending of the obviously one-sided fight, caught by the studied violence of that scene. The swarthy figure was slightly shorter than the blond, helpless youngster on the rope, but he moved lightly, confidently, and his lips were pulled back in a feral snarl. He was smashing at the youngster's kidneys, ignoring the unprotected jaw. A solid smash now would end the brutal punishment and save what was left of the boy's pride.

But the swarthy fighter was not out to end the fight that quickly. He shoved the sagging figure up with his left hand and continued to pound the man's kidneys with his right—short, chopping blows that twisted the boy's lips with terrible pain.

A thick-shouldered, grizzled man shoved men out of his way as he reached the youngster on the rope. He put a thick arm around the helpless man's shoulders and a gun glinted with grim authority in the flickering light of the chandeliers.

"All right, damn you!" he snarled. "He's had enough. You want to kill him!"

The swarthy fighter stood under the lights, sweat running down his muscled chest where black hair curled tightly. His shoulder muscles knotted as he moved his arms to clasp his hands over his head in arrogant gesture of victory as he turned and grinned at the crowd.

A small slight man in flowered waistcoat, long steel-pin coat and fawn-colored trousers had been watching the fight with cool detachment from the end of the bar. A jeweled stickpin flashed as he turned and crooked a finger to one of the bartenders. The man hurried over and leaned deferentially over the polished counter, he nodded as he stepped back.

Reaching under the counter he brought out a wooden bung-starter and pounded on the bar with it.

"Duke says the drinks are on the house!" he yelled as the crowd quieted. "Come and get it!"

THERE was a rush for the bar. Men crowded two and three deep around Jim, but something in the Lone Wolf's cold gaze stopped those nearest him from crowding. They gave this tall man elbow room instinctively.

A slight, gray-tempeled man in rumpled black suit joined the sheriff. Together they lifted the battered youngster off the rope, helped him under it. Draping the blond kid's arms over their shoulders, they started for the door.

The sheriff held his Colt in his right hand, his square jaw set, an iron defiance in his eyes. The boy's feet dragged across the room.

Jim watched them head for the door amidst the jeers of the crowd. They were intercepted by a lean-flanked, cat-footed man in black cotton shirt and pinstriped gray trousers. He was a hard-faced individual in his early twenties and he carried a cold authority in the badge that glittered on his shirt and in the low slung Colt on his thigh.

They conferred by the door. Jim saw Sheriff Soltight shake his head. The other shrugged and turned away, heading for the table he had left.

A few feet from Jim two serious-faced men in town clothes were pushing money across the counter to the grinning bartender. They turned and left, joining the sheriff at the door.

The slant-eyed individual guzzling his drink next to Jim chortled: "Duke sure showed up that darned uptown crowd. After the beating Packy gave the sheriff's loud-mouthed son they won't be bothering this side of Devil's Creek in a hurry!"

"Grudge fight?" Jim asked idly.

"Yeah," the other nodded, banging on the counter with his empty glass for a refill. "Rick Soltight kind of took a shine to one of Duke's gals and Packy told him to lay off. Rick sassed him and Duke stepped in and suggested they settle it in the ring." He watched eagerly as the bartender slopped whiskey into his glass. "Leave it to Duke to make money," he added slyly. He wiped his lips with his sleeve. "Couple of the sheriff's cronies lost a pile of dinero to Duke betting on Rick." He guzzled his drink and reached out for a refill.

The bartender shook his head and raised his voice above the bar clamor. "That's all, gents. Paying customers only now."

The drinker sidled away with a disappointed mutter. The clamor began to subside; the barline thinned as the freeloaders drifted away. The girls came down from the staircase and began mingling with the customers.

Two of Duke's men started to take down the improvised ring. Hatfield, nursing his drink, saw the swarthy fighter emerge from a back room. Packy had pulled a black, turtle-necked sweater over his barrel chest and his black hair had a high pomade gloss in the lamplight.

He nodded to the calls of admiration which greeted him and came across the big room, heading for the bar. A drunk weaved across his path and Packy jammed the heel of his palm into the man's face. The drunk piled into a card table and overturned it and lay still.

The Lone Wolf frowned. A real he-wolf, he thought coldly, and felt a pulse of recklessness throb in him. He turned back to the bar and picked up his drink. It was time for him to go. He had a body to turn over to the law—and he had a man to see tonight.

He heard the man as he came up to the bar, a light-stepping man for all his size—but the hand that fell on Hatfield's shoulder was not light. It was a hard hand and it pulled him around, shoved him aside.

Packy's voice had a gravelly insolence: "Out of the way, pilgrim! I need room when I drink."

Temper ran like a brush fire through the Lone Wolf. He was a man who took no shoving, and he turned now to appraise the burly fighter bellying up to the bar.

Packy was reaching for the bottle the bartender placed in front of him. He poured himself a generous shot and started to lift the glass to his lips.

Hatfield coldly and deliberately jostled his arm.

Whiskey spilled down Packy's chin and onto his sweater. It dribbled and made dark stains and for a moment the shock of the Lone Wolf's action held the fighter in a sort of puzzled trance.

Then his head came around, slowly, on his thick neck and his yellow-gray eyes met Jim's cool, green gaze. Hatfield was remembering the youngster who had taken a cruel and unnecessary beating at the hands of this bull-necked man.

"Reckon some jaspers are just naturally sloppy drinkers," he said thinly.

Packy's curse and movement were simultaneous. He dropped the glass and pivoted, driving his right in a vicious hook for the tall Ranger's face.

Hatfield moved his head four inches to one side. Packy's fist slid over Jim's shoulder and the force of his swing brought him around and against the Lone Wolf.

No one saw the iron fist which sank wrist deep in the fighter's solar plexus. But the shock of it burst like a startled light in his eyes; his dark face turned a muddy coffee color. His knees started to buckle.

Jim stepped back and whipped his left hand around in a solid smash to Packy's jaw.

The fighter put a hand out blindly for the counter, then his knees folded and he went down, sliding limply between the brass rail and the base of the bar.

CHAPTER III

Gunman, Get Out of Town

IT HAD started and ended fast and no one clearly saw what had happened. The men standing close to Packy turned, stared at the crumpled figure with startled, unbelieving eyes and began to edge away.

The bartender scowled. He placed both hands on the counter and leaned over it and looked down at the unconscious fighter, then he eased back and stared at Jim, his mouth making a lopsided O.

The uneasy silence spread along the bar to Duke Emerson. The owner of the Golden Nugget had his back to the counter and was sucking on an expensive cigar. He felt the stir among the men near him and one of them muttered: "What's happened to Packy?"

He turned quickly, frowning, and the men backing away from the brass rail gave him a clear view of Packy's sprawled figure and the tall, wide-shouldered stranger standing over him.

Surprise prodded him erect; his teeth clamped down on the cigar. He started for Hatfield, his dark, cold gaze moving from the Lone Wolf's impassive features to those of the open-mouthed bartender.

"What in hell's going on here, Sid?" he snapped. "What happened to Packy?"

The bartender shook his head. "Don't rightly know, Duke," he mumbled. He shot a glance at Hatfield. "This jasper made Packy spill his drink and Packy threw a punch at him. Next thing I knew Packy was—going down."

The gambler turned his narrowing gaze on the Lone Wolf. "What did you hit him with, brass knuckles?"

Jim shrugged. He started to turn, to finish his drink. He had not wanted to get involved here and he regretted his temper. He felt a cynical expectancy stir in him, knowing that these things were like a chain, each link hooked to another, leading only to more trouble.

He wanted to leave, but Duke would have none of it. The gambler's voice probed harshly: "Just a minute, fellow. I asked you a plain question. I'm in the habit of getting answers."

Jim turned. "Maybe your fighter has a glass jaw," he said.

Duke's eyes had a murky light. A slow laughter bubbled from him. "You poor

damn fool!" he sneered. "Packy'll kill you when he comes to!"

Jim's glance dropped to the man who was stirring, pawing dazedly at the brass rail in effort to pull himself up to sitting position. "Don't bet on it!" he answered shortly, and turned to leave.

He was five paces away from the bar, heading for the door. He saw Duke's blurred reflection in the window glass, and he whirled and fired.

Duke's shoulder gun was out and levelling when the Lone Wolf's first bullet ripped it out of his hand. Hatfield's second shot took the lobe from Duke's left ear.

The gambler froze, fear draining his narrow face of blood. He stared at the man crouched slightly behind the thinning gunsmoke, reading correctly the deadliness in those strange green eyes which surveyed that room with cold dispassion.

"Don't ever try that again, tinhorn!" Hatfield warned harshly.

Emerson made no comment. He reached slowly in his breast pocket for a handkerchief and as slowly brought it up to his bloody ear; a dark and ugly hate began crowding the fear from his eyes.

There was a stir among the men at the tables and the wide-shouldered hombre with the town marshal's badge pinned to his black shirt stepped clear. Jim regarded him and the thought was cold in the Lone Wolf that this lawman had stayed clear of the trouble until this moment. And it reminded him that he had been warned concerning the law in Paydirt and the implication of this man's move now brought a hard alertness to Hatfield.

THE marshal paused less than ten feet from Jim and his glance settled coldly on the tall Ranger.

"A fast gun with a mean temper," he said slowly. "A stranger in town looking for trouble." He waited for Jim to answer but Hatfield looked him over with cold disinterest.

"You're the kind we can do without in Paydirt!" the marshal snapped, nettled by Jim's silence. Temper made its sign in him, in the tightening of his lips. "I'll let you have one more drink, then I'll personally escort you to the end of town."

Jim shook his head. "You sound plumb unreasonable," he protested softly. "I see the badge on your shirt, but I don't recall being introduced."

The marshal's eyes narrowed. "The name's Sol Lengo," he said, "and as you say you can see the badge on my shirt. I'm the marshal of Paydirt, and I call the turn on who is welcome in town!"

"A right high-handed lawman," Jim murmured. "And a poor way to welcome a stranger."

Movement at the bar rail caught Jim's attention. From the corner of his eye he saw Packy Shane come to his hands and knees, look at Jim with burning hate, and push himself to his feet.

The muzzle of Hatfield's Colt halted the fighter's lunge; Packy froze, balanced on the balls of his feet, a snarl on his face.

"Once is enough for the evening," Jim said curtly. "You've had your fun and I've had mine. And with the permission of the young marshal of Paydirt, I'll have my drink and amble on."

"Out of town!" Lengo put in harshly.

"Out of here," Jim corrected thinly. "I've business in Paydirt. I'll leave when I'm through."

Lengo eyed the gun in Jim's hand. He was a man who did not take things easy, nor was he in the habit of being crossed. Jim saw the temper build up in the man, making him hard and dangerous.

"You'll leave when I tell you," the marshal said and his voice was tight and deadly. "And I'm telling you—"

The batwings slamming against the wall interrupted. He took a step back and turned, crouching slightly; then he eased, his eyes frowning, as Sheriff Soltight paced into the room.

The sheriff was followed by the small man in rumpled suit. They came into the room with the sheriff holding a Colt cocked in his fist and the small man was armed with a shotgun.

Soltight swung around as he spotted the marshal by the bar. He stopped, taking

in the situation with that one glance, and his muzzle lifted, centering on Hatfield.

His voice was a deep rumble: "You own that big sorrel stud anchored in front of Delaney's?"

Jim put his attention on Soltight, knowing what was bothering the lawman. He was caught in the middle here, between the sheriff and the marshal, and he had reason to distrust both.

"Yeah. That big stud's mine," he said clearly.

Sheriff Soltight scowled. "If you claim that sorrel then you know why I'm asking," he said. "That's Irvin Ramsey across his saddle. Accountant for the Lucky Strike mine. He's dead."

"So he is," Jim nodded. "That's why I brought him to town."

Sol Lengo's eyes were on the sheriff; they moved to the small man with the shotgun and a dark questioning made its urgent request in his glance.

"Ramsey disappeared yesterday morning," the sheriff said grimly. "He was on his way to the Lucky Strike mine with a twenty thousand dollar payroll. He jumped train somewhere between here and Tumbling Rock Gorge, with the payroll." He paused, took a slow breath. "Reckon it's your turn, stranger, to fill us in. Where did you run into Ramsey?"

"Up by a small lake, south of here," Jim said. "He was on the run from somebody and tried to borrow my cayuse." He outlined what had happened in a few terse phrases. He concluded quietly: "I didn't know who he was, sheriff. But he had mentioned Paydirt, and as I was headed in this direction, I thought I'd pack him along." Hatfield made a small gesture. "I stopped by your office and your daughter said I'd find you here."

Sheriff Soltight's brows knitted. "Story sounds honest," he muttered. He turned to the small man behind him. "What do you think, Doc? A fool might pack a man he killed into town and try to get away with it. And he doesn't strike me like that kind of a fool."

"You're wrong!" Duke cut in harshly. "Only a fool would walk in here and do what he did!"

The sheriff put his hard gaze on the gambler. "What did he do?"

Packy Shane took a step toward Hatfield, his humiliation riding him like a sharp prod. "Put that gun away, tinhorn, and I'll break you in two! Give me five minutes, man to man."

SHERIFF SOLTIGHT lifted his glance from Duke to the raging fighter, noting the swelling on Packy's jaw, the slight cut of his lip. Then he looked at Duke again, measuring this man's hate, the handkerchief pressed to his ear. The sheriff's gaze had an unholy light as he turned to the marshal.

"What happened in here, Sol? I heard a shot."

"I didn't see all of it," Lengo answered coldly. "But it looks like this big hombre cold-cocked Packy at the bar, then drew on Duke when Duke called him on it."

"Just a minute, marshal!" Jim interrupted. "For a lawman you sure ride a rough spur on strangers. I was walking away from trouble when that tinhorn pulled a gun on me. And unless they're all liars, any man in this room can prove it!"

The sheriff looked at the marshal. "Is that the way it was, Sol?"

The young marshal shrugged. "I didn't see it," he said sullenly.

An unholy grin lifted the corners of the sheriff's mouth. "Maybe you didn't know what you were doing, fellow," he said, "but you got off to a good start. You always come looking for trouble?"

Jim shook his head. "There isn't a more peaceable man in town," he protested. "And I'll prove it." He thrust his Colt into its holster and held up his hands.

Packy started for him, a curse on his thick lips. The sheriff's Colt stopped him. "Some other time," he growled. "I'll be glad to see it." He turned to Jim. "What this town needs is a few more peaceable hombres like you. My son Rick will be laid up for a spell, and I've got a deputy's star on my desk. I'll be pleased if you'd take it and I'll see that the pay is right."

Sol Lengo whirled on the sheriff. "You're riding a blind trail, Bill!" he snapped. "You dón't know this big jasper. Who is he? What's he doing in Paydirt? For all we know he might be wanted in a dozen counties."

"He gave Packy a taste of his own medicine," Soltight growled. "And he bucked Duke right here in his own place. That's enough for me, Sol!"

Lengo's jaw ridged. "I hate to call you a damn fool, Bill," he said grimly, "but that ain't enough for me."

The sheriff ignored him. He turned to the small, mild-looking man with the shotgun.

"How about you, Doc?"

Doctor Robert Spenser shrugged. He was wearing steel-rimmed spectacles and his eyes blinked as he stared long and carefully at Hatfield. "Looks like the kind of man we could use," he admitted cautiously.

Hatfield shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, sheriff." He looked at the tough young marshal and caught the implacable enmity in the man's cold eyes. He grinned.

"Might take you up on that deputy's badge, later—if my business doesn't pan out here in town."

The sheriff looked disappointed. "Have to ask you to come along with me now," he said. "I'll need you to sign a statement of what happened out at Calico Lake today."

Jim nodded. He turned and deliberately finished his drink. He put a silver dollar on the bar and swung away to join the sheriff.

Duke's thin voice reached across that still room as Hatfield and the sheriff neared the door.

"A deputy's badge isn't going to change things. You stay out of this side of town! Cross that bridge again and you'll be a dead man!"

Hatfield measured the gambler's threat with a cold smile. "If I come back across the bridge, Duke, I'll remember that. Don't get in my way, when I make up my mind to come."

CHAPTER IV

Johnny Cruze

LAURA SOLTIGHT said, "Keep still," and held the cold compress to Rick's swollen face. She was two years older than her brother and she had an older sister's bossiness toward him. But her lips trembled a little as she saw him wince and slide down in his chair and on impulse she ran a hand through his damp hair.

"Rick, you fool, you fool," she murmured.

They were alone in the sheriff's office. Her father and Doctor Spenser had brought Rick in and the doctor had advised her to use a wet towel on the facial bruises until he returned. There was something going on across the river, but they had not taken time to tell her. Now she waited, trying to keep her thoughts free of depressing speculation.

She heard a man's walk on the boards outside and she knew he was coming here before his shoes grated on the threshold. She turned to see who it was and her hand pressed suddenly hard against Rick's face. Her brother smothered a groan and pushed her hand away.

"Cripes, sis," he mumbled. "You hurt worse than—"

He looked past Laura to the slender, well-dressed man who had paused in the doorway. He frowned. "Hi, Johnny," he greeted lukewarmly.

Johnny Cruze came into the law office holding a pearl gray Stetson in his hands. He was a good looking, clean shaven man of twenty-eight with thin, sensitive features. His brown eyes measured a man squarely; there was an aura of breeding, of quiet self-assurance about him that caused most of Paydirt's rough crowd to instinctively say "sir" when addressing him.

He was superintendent of the rich Lucky Strike mine, and the owner of the short-haul Devil's Canyon Railroad, and

as such he was a political power in the county.

He said, "Good evening, Laura," and waited, and when she didn't answer he came into the room to stand beside Rick. "I heard you tried to whip Packy Shane," he said quietly. "You seem to have taken quite a beating."

Rick shoved himself up in the straight-backed chair. The lamplight fell full across his battered face. He twisted his swollen lips in defiant grimace. "Hell, Johnny, next time—"

"There'll be no next time!" his sister cut him off firmly. She turned to Johnny, her cheeks reddening. "At least he was man enough to fight for what he wanted!" There was an indirect accusation in her voice that Johnny Cruze caught.

"I've never doubted Rick's courage, Laura," he said gravely. "Only his wisdom." He saw her stiffen resentfully and he reached out and put a hand gently on her arm. "I'm sorry, Laura. I wish I could have helped. But—"

"None of this concerns you!" she snapped.

"Anything that touches you concerns me," he replied. His voice gentled. "Things haven't been the same with us for some time, Laura. You've avoided me. Why?"

She turned away from him, using the towel on her brother's face to gain composure. Rick's smothered voice protested through the towel and she eased the pressure on it.

"There's nothing to say," she said. She didn't look at Johnny. "You've gained what you wanted, haven't you? You don't need us."

"I don't need your father," he corrected bluntly. "But remember, it wasn't I who terminated—" He paused, turned to face the door as Sheriff Soltight's deep voice rumbled: "You take care of Rick, Doc. I'll have—"

The sheriff's solid bulk filled the doorway. He brought up short as he saw Johnny in the office; he measured the slender man with quick hostility.

Jim Hatfield loomed up behind the sheriff; he eased quickly against the inner wall and let Doctor Spenser walk inside. The doctor ignored Johnny. He set his shotgun down under the rifle rack and walked to Rick. He seemed tired and unwilling to mix in this new quarrel shaping up.

Bill Soltight's voice held a grave anger. "What in hell are you doing in my office, Johnny?"

"I came to see Laura," the other answered quickly. "And I wanted to have a talk with you."

"I told you to stay away from my daughter!" Soltight said harshly. He came into the office and behind him his shadow made its thick dark pattern on the wall. "I told you to stay away from here, unless you have official business."

"This is business," Johnny said. His voice had taken on an edge of impatience. "I'm facing a shutdown at the Lucky Strike if you don't get a payroll through to the men up there. I want to know if you've run down any leads on Ramsey."

"Sure, I've got a lead on your embezzling accountant!" Soltight sneered. He waited, enjoying the look of puzzlement that furrowed Johnny's brow. "Ramsey's dead! His body's in Dade's Funeral Parlor right now. This hombre brought him in." He turned to Jim then, scowling slightly. "Never did ask your name, fellow," he said bluntly. "You do have one?"

The Lone Wolf nodded. "Hatfield," he said casually. "Jim Hatfield."

He saw Johnny Cruze start; the slender man's eyes came on him hard and with a quick searching. Then they lidded.

Doctor Spencer's slight body stiffened; he turned and glanced at Jim, his eyes blinking behind his spectacles.

The sheriff waved a big hand toward Johnny. Evidently the name meant nothing to him. "Hatfield," he introduced, "this is Johnny Cruze. Johnny's the big wheel at the Lucky Strike and the sole owner of the Devil's Canyon Railroad." A deep-seated resentment struck its note in his voice. "An up-and-coming young man, Hatfield. We used to be partners."

Johnny's lips tightened. "I didn't dissolve our partnership, Bill," he reminded stiffly.

"I did!" the sheriff admitted grimly. "I know a freezeout when I'm caught in one!" His eyes held a kindling rancor. "You got more business here?"

JOHNNY turned to Laura, but she avoided his gaze. He shrugged. "I don't seem to." He turned to Jim. "I would like to know how you found Ramsey, Mr. Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf told him. Johnny nodded at the sheriff. "I'll drop by the funeral parlor and arrange for Ramsey's burial," he said.

The sheriff shrugged. "He was your man," he replied.

Johnny's smile held a cold displeasure. "He was a citizen of Paydirt, and he was murdered," he pointed out. "As such he is your responsibility, too, sheriff."

Bill Soltight took a threatening step toward the slender man. "Are you implying I'm—"

But Johnny Cruze ignored him. He turned to Hatfield. "Thanks for bringing Irvin in, Mr. Hatfield. And for telling me about the rope marks on his wrists. I never did believe Ramsey willingly stole that payroll."

Jim made a small motion of acknowledgement.

Johnny took a step toward Laura. "I'd like very much to see you again—" he began.

"You'll leave her be!" the sheriff bellowed. He came between Johnny and his daughter, his eyes blazing. "Now clear out of here."

Johnny faced the sheriff. He was outweighed forty pounds, but his eyes were level with the lawman's and they held no fear.

"I want to hear Laura tell me that herself, Bill."

"You'll hear me tell you," the sheriff said. His right hand drew back and Johnny said levelly, "Don't try it, Bill. I'd hate to have to hit you."

The very calmness of his voice stopped the sheriff. Standing to one side the Lone Wolf grinned. He was beginning to like this slender, quiet man.

Laura turned quickly then; there was a bright anger in her eyes. "I'll tell you, Johnny! Stay away from me. I don't want to see you."

Johnny's mouth shaped into a thin hurt line. He nodded stiffly. "I wanted to hear you tell me, Laura," he murmured. "Not your father." He turned and brushed past the sheriff and at the door he paused.

"I'll be in my rooms at the Canyon House until tomorrow morning, sheriff," he said coldly. "You've got Ramsey's body, and Hatfield's story—and even a blind man should see that it no longer is a simple case of embezzlement. I want to know what you're going to do about the missing payrolls, sheriff. And I don't have much time to wait."

The sheriff's thick chest swelled; his neck tendons bulged. "Get to hell out of here," he spluttered.

He stood in the center of the office, his big hands clenched, until Johnny's steps faded.

"The damned, impertinent dude," he said, and turned to the chair where Rick was wincing to the probing of Doctor Spenser's fingers. "Got him fixed up yet?"

Spenser came to his feet. "I'll have to tape him," he said. "He's got at least two ribs fractured."

Soltight's angry gaze softened. He put a hand on his son's shoulder. "You're a damn fool," he said, "but you put up a game fight." His voice roughened. "But next time you forget that badge you're wearing and tangle with Duke's pug over a cheap floozy, I'll beat the hell out of you myself!"

Spenser said sharply: "Don't call him down for something you would have done yourself, Bill." He put his hand under Rick's arm and helped the youngster up. "I'll have to tape you in my office, son. Can you walk?"

Rick nodded. "I'll be back here in the morning, dad."

"You'll be in bed!" the sheriff bellowed.

Laura put her shoulder under her brother's left arm. "I'll help, Rick." She looked at her father and there was anger in her gaze. "Leave him alone, dad. I'll

see that he gets home—and stays home!"

Hatfield came away from the door as the three of them went out. He walked to the desk and looked beyond it to the door which showed him the cell block in the back. Far as he could make out there were no prisoners in any of the cells.

Sheriff Soltight sighed. He walked over to the desk and sat down and reached for a quill pen and a sheet of paper. "Didn't expect to hold you up like this, Jim," he apologized. He started to write, hesitated, then swore as he crumpled the sheet of paper in his big fist and threw it in the basket. "Reckon you can write that statement down better'n I can," he said. "I'm a poor hand at paper work. Rick generally handles it for me."

Jim shrugged. He seated himself at the desk and penned a tight clear statement of what had occurred at Calico Lake and signed it.

The sheriff took it and shoved it in a drawer. He settled back in his chair, weariness deepening the lines in his face. He ran blunt fingers through thinning gray hair.

"I'm up a tree, Jim," he said reluctantly. "I need a good man in this office. Wish you'd think it over about this deputy's job."

HATFIELD nodded. "I might take you up on it later, sheriff." His voice held an idle curiosity. "What's the trouble here? That tough marshal I ran into in the Golden Nugget seems like a gun-handy lawman."

"Sol's all right," Bill conceded. "Hard and fast with a gun, but he keeps the town in line. He's the only lawman who kin cross that bridge into the new section of town without having to watch every shadow. But Lengo's town marshal—his jurisdiction ends at the end of the street." The sheriff shook his head. "I got the whole county to take care of. Most of it's just miles of desolation. There's seventy miles between Paydirt and Concho on the other side of the Anvils with nothing but a prospector's shack or two in between. Concho's bigger'n Paydirt right now and there's talk of moving the county seat there. Next election will probably see a lot of changes. But right now my troubles are here. The mines up on Big Lars, and the Lucky Strike in particular, are big business. And the Devil's Canyon Railroad can make or break the mines."

His lips twisted angrily. "Johnny Cruze's blaming me for the troubles he's been having. But if you ask me he's the one who's playing a deep game here. I can't prove it, but I think he's behind the mess of trouble that's been hitting the railroad."

"His own railroad?" Jim's tone was dubious.

"Yeah—his own railroad!" Soltight said. "I used to be a partner, but he froze me out. He knows the Lucky Strike mine can only show a profit if it can get its ore down here to the stamp mills. If he ties up the Canyon Railroad he ties up the mines on Big Lars."

"What can he gain out of that?"

Soltight shrugged. "Maybe he figgers he can buy into the Lucky Strike on his own terms. I told you he was an up-and-coming man, Jim. He's the kind who'll make a million dollars if he has to break every man in his way."

"That kind, eh?" the Lone Wolf murmured, but he was thinking he had not sized up Johnny Cruze that way.

"He froze me out, didn't he?" the sheriff snarled. "That's twice I've been froze out in my own bailiwick. I used to run a mule-freighting outfit up to the mines before the narrow-gauge railroad was built. That was during the early strikes. Only way to get supplies and equipment up there was along the narrowest, damnest trail this side of hell. But mules could haul it. I didn't think a railroad could. But a couple of fools named Fillmore and Seaverson built one clear up to Big Lars, following that mule trail most of the way. They went broke building it and had to let it go for almost nothing when the mines petered out. That's when Johnny Cruze stepped in and bought it."

Hatfield nodded. Some of the picture was clearer now. "And now someone is

trying to break the railroad?" he murmured.

"I told you who I think is behind it," the sheriff muttered. He got up and walked to the nearest cell door and closed it with a harsh clang. He turned and faced Hatfield and his anger was turned in on himself and he wasn't seeing the big Ranger.

"The last two men who took the payroll up to Big Lars jumped train somewhere along the way. Each time they cost the Lucky Strike owners somewhere between twenty and thirty thousand dollars. Both men were trusted employees of Johnny Cruze. Yet both of them saw a chance at easy money—" he threw up his hands.

"Ramsey worked for the Lucky Strike?"

"Accountant," the sheriff growled. "And the last man I figured to do a thing like that."

Jim frowned. "If he had decided to steal the payroll, he wouldn't be showing up later, where I saw him with two killers on his trail."

"Hell!" the sheriff cut in sharply. "Could be those men were hired by Johnny Cruze. Maybe Ramsey was ordered to jump train and then was double-crossed."

The sheriff's line of reasoning ran in that narrow groove of hate against the man he felt had froze him out of a partnership in the railroad, Jim saw, and nothing would change it.

Hatfield shrugged. "It's been a long day for me, sheriff. I'll move on to the Canyon House and get myself a room. You know where you can find me, if you need me for any further testimony."

Soltight nodded. "Hope you change your mind about accepting this deputy's job, Jim."

He watched the Lone Wolf walk out, a tall, wide-shouldered man against the night sky. He felt a settling depression take hold of him, and the sheriff shook himself, like a dog just out of the water. He walked to the door and stared down the crooked angle of Canyon Road to where the lanterns on the birdge cast their dim glare on the heavy planks to guide the drunks safely across.

The new section of Paydirt was still going strong. Somewhere a Colt ripped the night apart with its hammering echoes, then quieted. Bill felt a growing irritation nag at him.

That was Sol Lengo's job, and Sol was a capable man. He kept the town in line, especially the hard tough element across the river. He even, the sheriff admitted grudgingly, kept Duke Emerson and his bunch of toughs in line.

His mind lingered on the beating Rick had taken at the hands of Packy Shane, but he had to admit that his son had asked for it. So far as he knew Duke kept on his side of the river and kept his nose clean. But the sheriff was acutely aware that some day he would have to cross that bridge and have it out with Emerson. And he wondered where Sol Lengo would stand then. The tough marshal was a hard man to figure out.

Of one thing Bill Soltight was sure: Sol Lengo always put Sol's interests first. Everything else took second place with him.

The sheriff turned and walked heavily back to the desk. It occurred to him now that he had talked a lot to a tall, hard, green-eyed stranger he knew nothing about. He had been carried along on a rising tide of hope simply because this man had taken the unbeatable Packy Shane down a peg and put the fear of the Lord in Duke Emerson.

What did he know about Hatfield? Hatfield? The name nagged at him now, as though it was a name he should remember. Who was he?

Soltight shook his head. Maybe Sol was right. Maybe he had let his hatred of Duke blind him.

"The hell with you, Sol!" he muttered, and turned to the lower drawer in his desk where he kept a bottle of whiskey. It was half empty. He blew out the lamp and settled back in the creaky chair and stared at the open door, his anger fretting against the barriers of frustration.

He tipped the bottle to his mouth and drank . . . .

CHAPTER V

Shotgun Ambush

THE CANYON HOUSE was a big red brick structure almost elegant in its appointments. Leaving Goldy in the stables down the street, Jim stepped into the wide, carpeted lobby flanked on the window side by leather-backed settees, a half dozen potted palms strategically placed and a big marble-topped table in the middle of the floor space on which the St. Louis Dispatch and the Houston Chronicle of fairly recent vintage were displayed.

The Lone Wolf crossed over to the hotel desk and signed for a room. The desk clerk read his name and his voice lifted with professional interest. "Oh, Mr. Hatfield. I have something for you."

He turned to the bank of pigeonholes at his back and from one of the slots he took a sealed envelope which he handed to Jim. The Lone Wolf glanced at his name penned in bold script across the face of it and thrust the envelope in his pocket. He took his key and his warbag and went across the lobby to the wide staircase.

His room was on the second floor, at the far end of the hall. His footsteps made no noise on the worn carpeting—his shadow flickered silently along the dimly lighted walls. He opened his door and closed it and the closeness of the room brought him to the lone window which he tugged open. A damp breeze sifted the faded lace curtains. He pulled the shade down and turning, struck a match on the back of his trousers.

The china-based lamp sat on a bedside table. He lighted the wick and turned it up and gave his room a casual survey. It was like the hundred others he had slept in over the long years, better than most, yet impersonal in its appointments.

He stood in front of the dresser mirror, not seeing his image but the shadowy passage of those years. A restlessness worked up in him, leaving a flat distaste in its wake, and a desire to get out of this room. He was not tired enough to stay, and he suddenly realized he had not eaten since morning.

He washed and shaved and put on a clean shirt and then he remembered the envelope the hotel clerk had given him.

The note was short and to the point:

I'm in room 205. I'll be waiting to see you tonight. Johnny Cruze

Hatfield crumpled the note and burned it and the envelope in the big earthenware wash basin. He blew out the light, scattered the ashes out of the open window, and went downstairs.

The hotel dining room was closed. He stepped out on the porch and let his attention drift along the dark street that ran like a tunnel flanked by lighted windows and occasional street lanterns hung on corner posts.

Devil's Creek made its rushing murmur above the general clamor of the town, and listening, Jim heard the heavy sighing of the Devil's Canyon engine on the siding past the depot.

Paydirt, he saw, lay along the north side of the entrance to Devil's Canyon. The rails of the Santa Fe spur which fed into Paydirt glinted in the night darkness past the depot. They ran across the emptiness of the sloping plain toward the darkness of the southeast.

The Mallet 2-4-4 engine bellowed suddenly against the night and its drive wheels spun on the iron rails. Couplings clanged and the train began to move. A long spear of light stabbed into the canyon darkness . . . .

Jim rolled a cigaret and lighted it, a tall, wide-shouldered man in the shadows. Looking toward the bridge he had the momentary impulse to cross it again and force Duke's hand. But he had come here on other business and the years had built in him an iron discipline—he turned instead and walked south toward the depot until he saw a lighted window with Pot Of Gold Cafe painted across it.

The Mallet engine was booming heavily now, its noise magnified as it entered the

narrowing confines of the canyon. It would be heard for a long time, its booming pounding the night as it labored up the twisting grade to Big Lars.

At this late hour the Cafe was empty. A tall broomstick individual was sweeping up among the few tables. He came around the counter as Jim took one of the stools. "Just hash left," he said tiredly.

Jim nodded. "Coffee now," he ordered.

He was half through his hash when Doctor Spenser came in and sat on the stool next to him. Close up the medico looked old and tired. There was a seamed and unkempt air about him as he ran fingers through his thinning brown hair. His eyes seemed to have a vague disquiet as they appraised Jim from behind his spectacles.

"Saw you come in and thought I'd join you in a cup of coffee, Mr. Hatfield," he explained.

Jim noded. "How's young Soltight?"

Spenser shrugged. "He'll be all right. Don't know yet how much damage Shane did to his kidneys, but he's got a couple of fractured ribs. His face will heal fast, though it looks bad." He smiled pensively. "At Rick's age a man can take a lot of punishment."

THE COUNTERMAN came over with a mug of coffee and the doctor picked it up and sipped of the bitter brew. "You a lawman?" he asked suddenly, his eyes lifting over the cup, appraising Jim.

Jim took a forkful of apple pie. He could deny it, he thought. Yet he had no real reason to hide his identity from this man. The question had been asked casually and with an emphasis that indicated to Hatfield that the question was purely rhetorical.

He made a slight motion with his shoulders. "Could be," he admitted, and left it at that.

"Thought you might be," the doctor said. "Sheriff's been getting nowhere with the trouble here. Sometimes I feel he hasn't been too interested." He sipped his coffee again, and then added quickly: "Hell, Bill's doing what he can, I guess. I don't blame him, though, if he hasn't been working overtime combing the hills for the men who've been trying to sabotage the railroad. After the raw deal he got from Johnny Cruze—"

"The fellow I met in the law office?" Jim asked. At Spenser's nod, he added: "He struck me as a nice enough sort."

"Johnny's a smooth article," the doctor said coldly. "I've seen his type before. He's out to make all he can here, before the mine peters out again. And he'll play both ends against the middle, too." Spenser made a sudden impatient motion. "Hell, here I am running off at the mouth about the man I work for." He saw Jim's narrowing gaze and he added: "I'm the company medic. I go up to the mines on Big Lars two or three times a week. I don't have much of a practice in town here. A young doctor named Harry Kleeman handles most of the town cases."

Jim was interested. "I thought you were the only doctor in Paydirt. Something Ramsey said—" he saw the doctor's eyes widen behind his lens— "He was dying when I bent over him," Jim explained. "He asked for you."

"Hell!" Doctor Spenser sighed. "I knew Ramsey well, of course. Wish I could have done something for him." He got up and put a quarter on the counter and said, "Hope you decide to take that deputy's job, Hatfield. Bill's a stubborn sort and not too well liked, especially by the tough element across the river. He could use a fast hand with a gun."

The Lone Wolf shrugged. "If my business here doesn't pan out, doc, I may take it."

He watched the slight, somewhat stoop-shouldered man go out. He rolled a smoke and thought about the way the pattern of trouble was shaping up here.

The Lone Wolf had come to Paydirt because of a letter Johnny Cruze had written to Ranger Captain Bill McDowell, asking for Ranger help. But Bill Soltight, county sheriff, had hinted that Johnny Cruze was probably trying to wreck his own railroad in an effort to throttle the Lucky Strike mine, and Doctor Spenser, presumably the sheriff's friend, had just

given the impression, which Soltight himself had made no effort to hide, that the sheriff had not forgotten that Johnny Cruze had squeezed him out of what could have been a profitable partnership.

The big Ranger slid off his stool. He wanted one other story before he drew his own conclusions of what was happening here. He wanted to hear Johnny Cruze's side of it.

The hallway carpeting had enough substance to deaden Hatfield's footsteps. A light at the end of the hallway cast a flickering illumination—from behind a door ahead of Jim a man's thin voice whined angrily: "Damn it, Letty, I told yuh I didn't have more than two drinks." And a woman's harsh and unlovely interruption came into the hallway, and then was quiet.

Hatfield went on to his room, but didn't go inside. Room 205 was near the head of the stairs, but a bend in the staircase would hide him from anyone watching below.

He had come back to the Canyon House alone, but he had the feeling he was being watched—and he didn't want to be seen entering Johnny Cruze's room. Yet he had to take that chance.

He came back along the hall. A man snored loudly in one of the rooms he passed. Behind the door of 210 the woman's strident voice came again, overriding her husband's weak protests.

JIM paused in front of 205. An inner caution laid its intangible warning in him. He put his hand on the knob and glanced down at his feet. There was a quarter-inch crack between the door and sill, yet no light shone through. Suspicion made its deadly glint in the Lone Wolf's green eyes.

Johnny Cruze would hardly be waiting for him in the dark.

Hatfield turned the knob slightly and waited. Inside he heard someone stir, a small shifting of body in a chair. The silence that followed held a palpable warning to the grim-faced Ranger.

He turned the knob with quick movement and shoved the door open. In the same instant he flattened his body against the wall beside the door jamb.

The muzzle blast from the shotgun split

A TALL TEXAS TALE

FOOL DOG

A COWBOY took his new hunting dog for a test run. Presently he shot a duck. The dog walked out on the water, retrieved the duck and brought it in. The cowboy blinked, rubbed his eyes and tried again—with the same result.

Incredulous, bewildered and completely flabbergasted, he invited a neighbor to go with him the following day. True to form, when either man hit a bird, the dog walked out on the water and retrieved it. The neighbor said nothing. The cowboy said nothing. Finally, unable to hold in any longer, the owner of the dog blurted a question: "Did you notice anything peculiar about my dog?"

"Yeah," replied the neighbor. "Yeah, come to think of it I did. That fool dog never did learn to swim!"

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

the darkness of the room. Buckshot splintered the panels of the door across the hall.

The muzzle blast lit up the darkness long enough to give Hatfield a glimpse of a whiskered, surly-featured man sitting in a chair facing the door, and of Johnny Cruze lying sprawled across the bed.

Then Hatfield's Peacemaker was hammering its deadly reply—two slugs lancing into the room, the heavy reports merging with the shotgun explosion.

Inside the room a man grunted, as if the wind had been smashed out of him, then a chair overturned and there was the sound of a man's body hitting the floor boards.

Jim stepped inside that dark room before the reports faded. He turned quickly and his fingers sought for and found the bolt on the inner side of the door. He closed the door and bolted it and turned. From the middle of the room came a faint and aimless stirring that faded in a man's gusty sigh.

Hatfield crossed to the bed. Johnny lay across the counterpane. He touched the railroad man's face and felt it warm under his fingers—a pulse beat steadily at Johnny's temple.

A stickiness clung to Jim's hand. He traced the path of blood up to the small gash over Johnny's left ear and then Johnny stirred and groaned.

Jim nodded to himself. "Slugged and left to bait the trap. Someone knew I was coming here," he muttered.

There was a shuffling of feet in the hall outside the door and a rising murmur of voices. Muted but rising harshly above them, came the voice of town marshal Sol Lengo.

Jim turned away from the bed and crossed swiftly to the window. He looked down into a dark alley and judged it was all of fifteen feet down. He had no alternative. He shoved the window up higher and slid across the sill.

He heard Lengo's voice clearly now, hard and impatient. Then there was a hammering on the door. He grinned bleakly and dropped just as a shot blasted through the door.

Hatfield landed lightly, like a jungle cat. He was moving swiftly down the alley before Lengo broke his way into the room. He came alongside the shed which flanked his room window and jumping up, he hauled himself onto the flat roof.

He crouched there, hearing a confused clamor come from Johnny Cruze's room. He knew he'd be shot if he was seen here, but he knew, too, that this ambush had been planned and that he would have a tough time explaining to Sol Lengo if he had remained there. And Hatfield was determined on playing his own hand here.

He was glad he had left his window open. He judged the six feet of space separating him from the window sill and jumped. His hands clamped over the wood and his body made its small thump against the building side. He pulled himself up and into the room and then closed the window, gently.

Hatfield stood in the dark, a big, dangerous man planning his next move. He drew the Colt he had fired, blew smoke through the muzzle, slipped fresh cartridges in the chamber. Then he pulled his shirt off, rumpled his hair, and lighted the lamp. He unbuckled his gun belts and walked to the door with them in his hand and was buckling them on again as he stepped out into the hallway.

There was a small group of men around Johnny Cruze's door, looking in. In the doorway of 210 a big, heavy-boned woman in a wool wrapper towered over a wizened oldster. She saw Jim come out of his room and walk past them, up the hallway.

Sol Lengo came out of Johnny Cruze's room, shoving men aside. He saw Hatfield and he stopped; his weight shifted easily and he slid into a half crouch.

"Where have you been?" he asked softly, but his voice was belied by the ugly look in his yellow-gray eyes.

"In my room," Hatfield replied. "I heard shooting and came out to see what the rumpus was about."

Lengo's voice raged: "Like hell you were! There's a dead man in here, and someone—"

"He's right, marshal!" the big-boned woman cut in stridently. "This man just came out of his room." She sniffed. "How people are expected to sleep with these goings-on, I don't know." She turned to the small man beside her. "I'm not staying in town another minute, Joshua."

Jim pushed past the town marshal and looked inside the room. Johnny Cruze was sitting on the bed, his head in his hands. The whiskered ambusher lay on the floor beside the overturned chair. Across the room curtains moved to the breeze coming in through the open window.

THERE was a stir out in the hall and Doctor Spenser came into the room. He glanced at the man on the floor, but didn't bother to check closer. He turned to Lengo. "What happened here, Sol?"

The marshal lifted his shoulders. He was eyeing Hatfield with a baffled air. He couldn't prove anything against this tall man and it seemed to irritate him.

"I happened to be down in the lobby when I heard a shotgun go off, doc," he snapped. "Ran up here and found the door locked. When I broke through I found this man dead and Mr. Cruze on the bed. Looked like someone busted him across the skull with a Colt."

Spenser frowned. He turned to Johnny and probed at the gash over the slender man's ear with professional interest. "You'll have a bad headache for a few hours," he said, "but not much more. You were lucky."

Johnny pushed the doctor's hand away and stood up. His eyes, dark with pain, caught Jim's—he turned to Lengo.

"I told you what happened," he said sharply. "I heard a knock on the door and opened it. I didn't see who hit me. I don't know who that man—" he gestured to the dead man— "is, or who killed him. I have no idea what went on here."

Lengo wasn't satisfied. His yellowish gaze was like a stalking cat's, cold and unwinking, moving from Johnny to Hatfield.

"Someone killed another man in this room!" he said. "Killed him and went out through your window. And you say you didn't see him?"

Johnny's lips tightened. "No."

Lengo shrugged. He turned to Hatfield, made a curt gesture to the body on the floor. "You know this hombre?"

Jim shook his head. "I'm a stranger in town," he reminded coldly.

Lengo took a deep breath. "I haven't forgotten," he snarled. He turned to the men clustered around the door. "All right, let's get the body out of Mr. Cruze's room, down to Dade's Funeral Parlor."

He waited until the body had been carried out, then he turned to Jim. "For a stranger in town, you seem to have an affinity for trouble."

"Cut it, marshal!" Johnny Cruze said curtly. "If you've got a quarrel with this man, take it outside. If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I want to be alone."

Lengo whirled. Doctor Spenser took his arm, checking the marshal's angry reply. "Let's go, Sol," he said briskly. "Mr. Cruze is right."

Hatfield followed them out in the hall. Behind them the door closed firmly. The Lone Wolf smiled faintly. "You have anything more to say to me, marshal?"

Lengo gritted his teeth. "Yeah. I don't like your face or your habits. I don't like anything about you, fellow—and men I don't like I'm suspicious of. You may be innocent as hell, but I doubt it. Someone killed that whiskered gent in Johnny Cruze's room and I don't have to strain my brain to know it was you."

"Why?" Jim cut in drily. "Why would I kill a man I don't know?"

"I ain't sure you don't know him!" Lengo snarled. "And I don't give a damn why you killed him. But I'm telling you this much right now. I'm giving you until noon tomorrow to get out of Paydirt. Remember that—until noon tomorrow!"

He turned on his heel. Doctor Spenser glanced at the marshal until Lengo passed out of sight down the stairs, then he turned to Hatfield. He made a small gesture of helplessness.

"Sol's a lot like the sheriff!" he said. "Plumb set in his ways, and a good deal

more dangerous. I wouldn't cross him, Hatfield."

Hatfield shrugged. "I never cross a man, unless he gets in my way. You might tell him that, doc. He'll last longer."

An odd gleam came into Doctor Spenser's eyes and he nodded stiffly. "I'll tell him." He turned and followed the marshal down the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

"Don't Crowd Me!"

JOHNNY CRUZE was sitting in the stuffed chair by the bed end when Jim Hatfield came into his room an hour later. It was past midnight and the hotel had settled down for the night.

Hatfield closed the door and eyed the bullet holes which had ripped the bolt off the door. He found a straight-backed chair and propped it under the knob and stood frowning at the panels for a brief moment. Then he turned and walked to the foot of the bed and sat down facing Johnny.

The railroad owner lifted sick eyes to Hatfield. "Guess it leaked out," he observed. "He was waiting for you, wasn't he? The man with the shotgun?"

Jim shrugged. "The marshal got here sudden like, too," he pointed out. "Could it be he expected trouble up here?"

Johnny made a weary gesture. "I don't get along with Sol Lengo, if that means anything to you, Hatfield. He's—well, the sheriff favors Sol as a prospective son-in-law." Johnny's voice held a faint resentment. "Bill Soltight likes a hard man and Lengo fills the bill all right."

The Lone Wolf smiled. "What about Miss Soltight?"

"Laura?" Johnny got up and walked slowly to a small cabinet and took a bottle of bonded Bourbon from within. He turned and looked at Jim. "She doesn't like Sol. But she believes I froze her father out of a partnership in the railroad." He poured into two glasses and turned to Jim.

"I'm doing a lot of talking to a man I don't really know." His voice was level. "You do have identification, Hatfield?"

Jim took his Ranger badge from his boot—the circle of shining silver enclosing a lone star. A piece of metal made invaluable by the blood and guts of the men who gave it meaning and substance.

"You wrote Captain McDowell a letter," he said. *"I need a man I can trust here,"* he quoted. *"He'll have to be good with a gun and he'll be taking his life in his hands if it gets around that I sent for him."*

"That's enough," Johnny Cruze cut in. "I'm satisfied." He held out the drink he had poured for Jim. "I wrote to Captain McDowell for help," he admitted. "But I didn't expect to get the famous Lone Wolf."

Jim shrugged. "I was headed this way when Captain McDowell's message, with your letter, reached me. What interested me most was that you thought the sheriff was behind all your trouble here."

Johnny waved a disparaging hand. "Maybe it will make things clearer if I start at the beginning, Jim." He settled back in his chair, glass in hand. "I'll start with the time I came to Paydirt, about two years ago. The mines up on Big Lars were petering out. The Lucky Strike, the big producer, was about to shut down." He took a sip of his Bourbon and added: "Most of the miners are on a bare ridge shelving off Big Lars. No room for a town, so Paydirt came into being down here, at the head of Devil's Canyon. It's about six miles to the Lucky Strike as the eagle flies, but twenty-six by rail or muleback."

Hatfield nodded, recalling some of the mining history of this country. About thirty million dollars in gold had been taken from the Devil's Canyon diggings over a period of six years. Then, as the region seemed about to play out, a new strike had been made in one of the Lucky Strike's abandoned tunnels.

"You've probably heard the story," Johnny said. "I poked around in the Lucky Strike with the consent of the owners, friends of mine, who are in New

Orleans. I had a hunch if we cut a drift in one of the old tunnels we'd hit a new vein and it paid off."

He got up and refilled the glasses. "I was just a young mining engineer when I came here, Jim. For my lucky guess I was given some shares in the Lucky Strike and made superintendent. It pays me well. But I want more than a job. I tried to buy one of the mines flanking the Lucky Strike but everyone had hiked prices out of sight after the new strike. Then I had a chance to buy the Devil's Canyon Railroad."

He shrugged, looked into his glass. "It seemed like a good business venture at the time. I knew the Lucky Strike would go on producing for a long time and whoever owned the railroad would stand to make money. I got Sheriff Soltight to go in on the venture with me."

"Why?" Jim asked, frowning. "You didn't need his money."

Johnny shook his head. "He didn't have anything to invest. But I wanted Bill on my side. I think I felt a little sorry for him. He used to run a mule train up to the mines at Big Lars before Fillmore and Seaverson built the railroad and wiped him out. I know how he felt about that railroad. And when I had a chance to buy them out cheap I told him about it. He seemed glad of the chance to come in with me."

"He seems to think you froze him out," Jim recalled.

Anger made its tightness around Johnny Cruze's mouth. "That's what's bothering me, Jim. From the first we had trouble. Trestles burned, railbed blocks, engine trouble. Sheriff Soltight didn't do anything. He'd ride around and come back and the sabotage would keep on. We had words over it. Most of the time I'm busy here at the mine. I depended on him to sort of keep things running on the railroad. First argument we had he blew up and pulled out. He's a pigheaded, blind, old—"

JOHNNY eased back in his chair. "I didn't break up the partnership, Jim, he did. And that's what made me suspicious. The last two payroll clerks who left town for Big Lars disappeared somewhere between here and the mines."

"You think the sheriff's trying to break you?" Jim asked thinly.

"I can't figure it any other way," Johnny replied grimly. "He's the only man who stands to gain if the railroad goes broke. There's always his mule train to fall back on."

The Lone Wolf got to his feet and put his empty glass on the cabinet. He was thinking that both men had said the same thing of each other.

"What about that bunch in the Golden Nugget?" he asked abruptly. "Duke Emerson? Where does he fit in?"

Johnny spread his hands. "Right where Duke always fits—where it pays off for Duke. That's why I don't believe the Duke has anything to do with it. He's got a good thing in that gambling hall, as long as the mines on Big Lars are paying off. Break the railroad and the Lucky Strike faces a shutdown, and what does Duke get out of that?"

He got up and took Jim's glass and Hatfield shook his head. "That's my limit for tonight, Johnny." He picked up his hat. "That dead man I brought in tonight? Ramsey? You trusted him?"

"With ten times the payroll he was carrying," Johnny said. His eyes had a stubborn glint. "Ramsey didn't run off with the payroll, and I don't believe Ed Minik, the other payroll man, did either. They both took the night train out of Paydirt, and somewhere between here and the mining camp on Big Lars they disappeared. I know what it looks like—what it was probably planned to look like. It's what the sheriff believes, and most of the town, too. Two men who succumbed to the temptation of easy money. But I think both Ed and Ramsey were held up and taken off that train, although how that was done with no one noticing seems impossible."

"It could be they both jumped train with the money and someone else trailed them and took it from them," Jim said

laconically. "There's several ways of looking at it. How much money in that last payroll?"

"About thirty-two thousand dollars."

"A lot of seemingly honest men have gone wrong over less," Jim murmured. "Anyone notice Ramsey on the train?"

"Several boys from the day shift were in the coach with him," Johnny said. "They were pretty tuckered out from the day in town and didn't pay much attention to Ramsey. Doc Spenser was on the train, too. He said he and Ramsey stepped out to the platform for a smoke, then the doctor came inside to get away from the engine smoke."

He made an impatient gesture. "Doctor Spenser said he didn't think of Ramsey again until they got to camp, then he was gone."

Jim nodded, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Happened the same way with the other payroll man?"

Johnny nodded. "I trusted both men. We didn't advertise the payroll, of course. The sheriff knew it, and his son, Rick. Not too many people did. But I suppose the word could have gotten around." He shook his head. "I still don't believe Ramsey tried to steal that payroll, Hatfield. He didn't have the nerve, for one thing. But someone is out to break the railroad. And a breakdown on the Canyon line will cause a shutdown at the mines. I've had three wires from New Orleans already. My credit won't be worth a plugged nickel if I lose another payroll."

"When is your next one?"

"I'm waiting on a wire from New Orleans," Johnny muttered. "I'm facing a strike up at the Lucky Strike by week end if I don't get it. Some of the men have already walked out." His jaw set grimly. "I'm taking this next payroll up from Paydirt myself."

Hatfield grinned eagerly. "I've got a better idea, Johnny. Nothing might happen if you took it up yourself, and you'd never know if Ramsey and the other payroll man didn't try to abscond with the money. Nor could you be sure of the next man you sent up."

Johnny frowned. "What are you getting at?"

Hatfield walked to the door, pulled the chair away from under the knob. "I'll tell you later," he said. "Soon as I check on a few things."

SHERIFF SOLTIGHT hiked his booted feet up on his scarred desk top and stared morosely at the marshal who paced angrily within the thin splash of morning sunlight coming through the office windows. The sheriff had a hangover and it added nothing to his surly mood.

He said: "You can't prove anything on him, can you, Sol?" and felt a malicious pleasure at the flaring hardness of the marshal's eyes.

"I don't have to!" Sol snapped. "Damnit, Bill, what's happened to you? You gonna let every two-bit gunman come into Paydirt and do just about what he wants?"

"He hasn't done anything I'd want him for!" Bill growled. "Just what has Hatfield done? I questioned witnesses this morning. Packy Shane tried to shove him around and got hit so fast and hard no one saw it." A thin pleasure was in the sheriff's tone. "Duke tried to take a hand while Hatfield's back was turned." He raised a hand, blocking Sol's angry retort. "Just a minute, Sol. Maybe you didn't see it, but a half dozen people I talked to did. Hatfield's—"

"A fast hand with a gun!" the marshal conceded harshly. "But think a moment, damnit! We've got troubles here, Bill. Are you blind? What's a gunslinger like Hatfield doing in Paydirt?"

"Maybe we can ask him!" the sheriff snapped, nettled at the other's sharp words. "Just as soon—"

"You can ask me right now," Hatfield said pleasantly.

Sol Lengo whirled, his right hand dropping instinctively for the butt of his Colt. The sheriff took his feet off the desk and surveyed the tall figure in the doorway.

"Come in," he invited.

Hatfield stepped inside. He said: "If that deputy's job is still open, I'll take it, sheriff."

Soltight came to his feet. He shot a look at the marshal and his lips tightened stubbornly. "You're danged right, it's still open." He took a badge from his desk drawer and held it out to Jim who pinned it to his coat.

"Raise your right hand," the sheriff said, and swore Hatfield in.

Sol's sneer was an ugly thing as he watched. "Reckon you played your hand close, this time, fella. That star figgers to give you legal status in Paydirt. But don't forget, I run this town, not the sheriff's office. And what I told you about this noon still goes. Star or no star, get out of Paydirt, or I'll kill you!"

"Sol!" the sheriff yelled angrily. "Are you crazy? You're riding this too far. What in hell have you got against Hatfield?"

"I don't like his looks!" Sol sneered. "Just figger it that way. And don't you crowd me, Bill!'

He turned and stepped away and nearly collided with Doctor Spenser coming in. "Get the hell out of my way," he snarled unpleasantly, and turned out of sight.

Doctor Spenser turned to look after him. Then he put his glance on Hatfield, on the scowling sheriff. "What's biting him?"

"Pride, maybe," Soltight answered heavily. "He's got a tough job here, Hatfield," he said, trying to make excuses for the man. "And he takes little pushing."

The Lone Wolf's green eyes held a faraway glint. "I'll steer shy of him, Bill—unless he corners me. I don't take to pushing myself."

"A hell of a situation," Doctor Spenser observed, sinking wearily on a chair. "Bill's temper isn't what could be called even, by any means." He sighed. "If the law starts fighting among itself here—"

Hatfield shrugged. "I won't bother Lengo," he promised. He reached inside his pocket and brought out the harmonica he had picked up on the slope above Calico Lake.

"Thanks . . . you're a pretty good shot yourself!"

"Ever see this before, Bill?"

The sheriff took it into his hands. He shook his head, passed it back. "Can't place it. Why?"

Jim told him. "I had a hunch the man who dropped it might be from Paydirt. If he is, and I picked him up, we might get a line on those payroll robberies."

He was watching the sheriff's face for some giveaway, but Bill's stubborn features held only a scowling displeasure. "Rick might know," he said. "The kid stuck his nose across the river a lot." He turned to Doctor Spenser. "Ever see this before?"

The doctor shook his head. "Can't say I have. Nor," he added slowly, anticipating Jim's next question, "have I had anyone come in recently for a gunshot wound.

Had one stabbing and two head wounds last night."

"What about that other doctor you told me about?" Jim cut in.

"Kleeman?" Spenser's eyes blinked behind his spectacles. "Lawrence Kleeman has his office over the Miner's Bank."

The sheriff said, "I'll go with you, Jim," and turned for his hat on a hook on the wall behind him. The sudden motion made his head spin. He staggered slightly and put a hand on the desk top and said thickly, "Reckon I'll have to pass this one up. I need a half pot of black coffee first."

Jim said sympathetically, "It might lead to nothing anyway, sheriff. But I might as well start earning my keep."

Spenser turned to Bill after Hatfield had left. "A sharp man," he observed. "And a big man," he added slowly, his eyes narrowing coldly.

Sheriff Soltight took a deep breath. He was worried now, with Sol's words echoing in his ears. He had put a star on a gunman he knew nothing about and thereby given legal sanction to anything the big man might do.

"Let's hope he don't get too big for the job, eh, doc?" he muttered.

CHAPTER VII

Blowup at Barraby's

RICK SOLTIGHT'S gaze drifted to the sun shining through the kitchen window as he played the jack of clubs. His sister said sharply: "You're not thinking at all," as she took the hand, and added succinctly: "We're playing hearts, but you don't have to look so displeased because you have to play with your sister."

"Aw, it ain't that, sis," Rick protested. His face was still puffed and there were blue and lemon yellow blotches on his jaw and under his eyes. "The doc wound so many layers around me I feel like a mummy. I'm not hurt that bad," he muttered rebelliously.

"You're hurt bad enough to have to stay in for a while," Laura said. She knew what was making Rick restless, and while she didn't approve, she understood. "Get well first before you try to see that girl again."

"Look who's handing out advice," Rick mumbled. "Johnny's a nice guy, even if dad doesn't like him."

Laura slammed her card down. "You mind your own business," she said inconsistently.

Rick grinned, though it hurt his face. "Maybe you'd rather have Sol calling on you?" He saw the flash of her eyes and added, "Dad's all for tough guy Lengo."

"And you?" she challenged.

"Me?" He shrugged. "Heck, I'm just the kid brother, sis."

"Don't evade the subject," she said grimly.

"I don't trust Sol," Rick said simply. He scowled at the card his sister had played and took it with the queen of hearts.

Rick's answer surprised Laura. For the past five years she had been the only woman in the Soltight house, and she had been both mother and big sister to her brother. It had never occurred to her that Rick even considered her emotional problems, and his expressed liking for Johnny Cruze secretly pleased her. She was loyal to her father, but she knew that she had not been fair to Johnny—she had not even given him a chance to explain about the dissolved partnership.

Rick broke through her thoughts. "Someone's knocking on the door, sis." His grin had a lopsided look. "Might be Johnny came calling anyway."

LAURA got up, reddening, and went to the door. She was thinking of Johnny, but the tall man with the crossing gun belts who smiled at her was not the railroad man.

"Dad's not at home," she said.

"I know," Hatfield replied. "I've come to see your brother."

She turned and looked back at Rick, a doubtful frown in her eyes. "He's really not well enough—"

"I'm well enough for anything," Rick growled. "Come on in, Mr. Hatfield."

Hatfield came to the kitchen table. "You look like you've been in a stampede," he said cheerfully. "Didn't you ever learn to duck?"

"I did," Rick said, unabashed. "Ducked into every punch he threw." He looked up at his sister who was scowling. "I'll knock his head off next time." He chuckled as his sister turned away.

"Coffee, Mr. Hatfield?" she asked somewhat coldly.

The Lone Wolf smiled. "I'd be mighty pleased, Miss Soltight."

"Aw, call her Laura," Rick said. He watched Jim settle in a chair. "I heard what you did to Packy Shane. Two punches and—wow!" His eyes gleamed. "Give me a week working out with you, Mr. Hatfield, and I'll—"

"Whoa!" Jim cut in, grinning. "Not so fast, Rick. And you can start calling me Jim."

Laura came to the table with the coffee pot and cups. "I feel terrible about Mr. Ramsey," she said. "I knew him pretty well. He didn't seem like the kind of man to try to steal money. Or anything else for that matter."

"I'm not sure he did," Jim said. He ran his knuckles across his badge. "I'm filling in as deputy in your place, Rick. I don't expect to hold the job too long, just until you get back on your feet."

"I'm on my feet now," Rick said. "I don't intend to sit around playing hearts with sis all week, no matter what my father says."

Jim shrugged. "I'd stay put for a while, anyway," he advised. "Give me a chance to earn a week's pay," he grinned.

"Rick's determined to go back and see that girl he got into trouble over. Sometimes I think he's as bullheaded as dad," Laura said.

"Look who's talking," Rick snapped. If you weren't so stubborn you'd let Johnny—"

"Let's talk about this," the Lone Wolf interrupted. He placed the mouth organ on the table. "Ever see this, or know of someone who plays this?"

Rick focussed his attention on the harmonica. "Looks like the one Zack Miller uses. Why?"

"Who's Zack?"

"A tough who hangs out at Barraby's Pool Room, across the road from Duke's Golden Nuugget." Rick frowned. "A gunslinger who drifted into Paydirt two or three months ago. Generally hangs around with his partner, a reedy gent with a cast in his left eye and a touchy disposition. Name of Voss Garrett."

Jim nodded. "Guess I'll pay Zack a visit."

Rick came forward in his chair and made a grimace. "Barraby's place is a tough hangout, Jim. If Zack's in there, you'll probably find Voss around. And watch Monk Barraby. He's a big, hairy jasper with sleepy eyes. Spends most of his time smoking a cigar and looking at the pictures in the Police Gazette. But he sees everything that goes on in his place, and he's mighty fast with the sawed-off shotgun he keeps under the counter."

Jim came to his feet and pocketed the harmonica. "Thanks, Rick. I'll keep my eye on him."

Laura walked to the door with the Lone Wolf. "I'm sorry for the way I acted when you first came to the office, Jim. But I was terribly worried about Rick, and—other things." She made a weary gesture. "Sometimes I wish dad was back in the freighting business."

Hatfield smiled. "There are times when trouble looks bigger than reality," he murmured. "Your father is a stubborn man, and a narrow man, and Johnny Cruze has his pride. Both are blind to their shortcomings. But I have a hunch things are going to work out, Laura."

She stood in the doorway and watched him stride up the street. A tall, wide-shouldered man against the slanting sun. There was a confidence in this new deputy that lightened her fears and inspired trust. She heard Rick's voice behind her. "Quit mooning over that big feller, Laura. He's not for you. His kind's not for any woman. His kind rides the long trails—alone."

The Lone Wolf came out to Canyon Road and stopped in at the stable where he had left Goldy. The big stallion came up to him, nosing him over the stall bars.

"Getting fat and sassy," Jim said, shoving Goldy's muzzle away from his cheek. He fed the sorrel four lumps of sugar, rubbed the sleek muzzle. "Take it easy, feller," he muttered. "We might have to do some hard riding soon."

He crossed the bridge with the sun hard against the left side of his face, glinting from the badge on his coat. He saw Sol Lengo come down the street across from him. The marshal paused and watched Jim like a big cat eyeing a jungle rival.

It lacked two hours of noon.

Jim walked past the marshal, a tall, easy-moving man—he was following a lead that was like a fuse leading to a charge of dynamite. The pattern of the trouble here was plain now, but there was a key part missing. He had a feeling that the mouth organ in his pocket would lead him to it.

Barraby's Pool Hall loomed ahead, a false-fronted, unpainted board structure that already listed to the left. The windows fronting the street were dirty and dead flies sprinkled the frames.

Jim paused before the door and let his gaze move across the dusty road to the Golden Nugget; he was remembering Duke's threat. But an air of somnolence clung to the big frame gambling hall, the tired and deserted atmosphere that went with the early morning hour. The Golden Nugget was a place that stayed open until the last paying customers went home; then the drunks were thrown out and the bar closed. Now the only sign of life around the big batwings was a mangy-looking mongrel sniffing at the heels of an uneasy oldster who had come out to empty a bucket of dirty water.

Inside the pool room sounded the clack of balls colliding. Hatfield opened the door and stepped inside a close, smokey room that probably had not been ventilated for weeks.

The man behind the counter on the left was big and hairy and seemed half asleep. He was sitting on a high chair over the counter, his elbows on it, his big hairy hands holding his head while he stared down at a spread-out magazine. A cloud of smoke drifted up from between his hands.

Jim's gaze drifted from this man who did not even glance up to see who had entered and lingered briefly over the two men playing eight-ball on the near table. A big gray tomcat lay curled in the middle of the other table.

A reedy individual, gun-hung and long-faced, sat in a chair against the far wall, sliding a cue stick up and down between his hands.

Warning rang its bell in the Lone Wolf and a tight expectancy entered his green gaze. He walked over to the counter and said clearly, "Seen Zack Miller lately?"

Monk Barraby took his time lifting his face from his hands. He rolled the cigar between his lips and blew smoke at Jim.

"Purty, ain't she?" he answered, grinning salaciously.

Jim kept his glance on the pool room owner's face. From the corner of his eye he caught the exchange of glances between the two pool players. The reedy jasper, who probably was Voss Garrett, Zack's sidekick, slowly let the cue stick slide down between his feet.

"Zack Miller?" Jim asked with level patience.

Barraby's small black eyes traveled the Lone Wolf's frame from boots to hat crown. He looked pointedly at Hatfield's badge. "You the law?"

"I am," Jim said calmly.

"What do you want of Zack?"

Jim reached inside his pocket and placed the harmonica on the counter. "I want to give Zack back his mouth organ."

Barraby frowned. "Didn't know Zack played one of them things," he rumbled. "Knew he was a windbag—" He grinned at his own joke, but Jim's face remained grave.

Barraby grunted. "Reckon you'll find Zack in the back room," he said, jerking a thumb toward a closed door. "He didn't feel any too well this morning."

A smile flitted across the Ranger's face. He had an idea why Zack wasn't feeling too well. But as he turned and started for the rear room the expectancy peaked up in him. He didn't like the hands-off atmosphere here, he was suspicious of Barraby's easy acceptance of his request.

Behind the apparent casualness here was a grim waiting, a leashed tension.

He reached the back door, turned the knob, and stepped in with the opening door. It slammed against the inner wall as he stepped lightly to one side of the door frame, thereby out of reach of the guns in the pool room. His own right hand Colt was easy in his palm as he surveyed the small back room.

There was a sharp odor of carbolic salve in the confined space, and a fainter, sweeter smell he couldn't quite place. There was this mingling of unusual odors in the room, and a man lying still on the makeshift bunk.

The man lay fully clothed, on his back, and his mouth gaped open. It was a slack, reddish-stubbled face that looked up at the ceiling, but his wide blue eyes had a vacant stare. Hatfield knew the man was dead before he bent over him.

Zack's left shoulder was bandaged, and the job had been done by a professional. But Jim knew that it was not the shoulder wound which had killed the gunman.

THE LONE WOLF looked close, studying the body. There was no mark of violence on the killer, other than the bandaged shoulder, but the sweetish odor was stronger as he bent over the man. Something tugged at the big Ranger's mind, shaping the suspicion into a pattern in his thoughts.

There was nothing more he could learn here. He turned and left the room, and Barraby's ominous voice halted him just outside.

"Did you give Zack his mouth organ?"

Jim's weight shifted imperceptibly to his toes. He felt the trouble lay like a submerged reef in a sunlit lagoon. Somewhere between here and the front door they would make the play they had been waiting for.

"Zack's dead," he said diffidently. "Reckon he won't need it now."

Voss Garrett stood up and let the cue stick fall. It made a clatter on the floor and it awoke the cat.

"Dead?" His voice rasped like an unresined bow across cheap catgut. "Zack was alive an' kicking just a few minnits ago."

"Then he cooled mighty fast," Jim answered. "He's dead. And from the looks of him he scared himself to death."

A sneer crawled across the narrow, pinched face of Voss Garrett. "I say Zack was alive when you went in that room, deputy. If he's dead, you just killed him!"

Jim's eyes held dancing green lights. "Sure," he said softly. "I choked him to death with his harmonica." He balanced forward on his toes now, a deadly man knowing this trap had been laid for him and there was no peaceful way out. "What do you intend to do about it?" he asked bleakly.

"Zack was my friend!" Voss snarled. "An' no damn badge-toter can walk in an' kill him."

He drew and fired once under the rush of his words, but he was dying as he fired. Jim's slugs lifted him up on his toes, he twisted around to the impact and fell against the wall and slid down.

The two pool players were slow. The first one fell across the table, scattering the balls, the other, firing hastily, turned and plunged outside. Jim's levelling Colt moved away from the man's back and caught Monk Barraby as the pool room owner was levelling the sawed-off barrel across the counter.

The muzzle blasted a hole in the ceiling as the Lone Wolf's bullets smashed into the hairy man. He slid down behind the counter, pulling the shotgun with him.

Hatfield's eyes held icy glints as he moved toward the door. Through the dirty windows he glimpsed Marshal Lengo hurrying across the street. The Lone Wolf waited just inside the pool room until Lengo appeared at the door.

The marshal skidded to a stop and

reached for his Colt and Jim's long-barreled Peacemaker jabbed rudely into Sol's stomach. The Lone Wolf's voice held an unpleasant note. "Not so fast, marshal!"

Lengo gasped and his eyes rolled. The hard muzzle to his solar plexus turned him green around the edges. Jim reached over and took his gun and thrust it in his coat pocket. Then he spun Lengo around and shoved him back against the building wall.

"I don't want trouble with you," he snapped. "I promised the sheriff I'd steer clear of you."

Lengo's voice came in jerks. "I'll get you for this."

"Save your breath," Jim advised coldly. "One of the two men who killed Irvin Ramsey is in a back room in there. He's dead. He's got my bullet in his shoulder, but that wasn't what killed him. I came here to find him and walked into trouble. You'll find the others inside."

"Until noon!" the marshal breathed, ignoring Jim's explanation. A naked hate drove him, blinding him to all else. "I'm coming for you then, Hatfield!"

Jim shrugged. "I figured you would," he said softly, and turned away.

CHAPTER VIII

"Don't Let Him Ride Back"

THE SHERIFF was in the Cafe holding his head between his palms and staring blankly into his coffee cup when the Lone Wolf slid onto the stool next to him. He turned and eyed Hatfied with dull regard.

"Get to see Doctor Kleeman?"

"Not yet," Jim replied.

"Where've you been?" The sheriff's voice was suspicious.

"Around. I had a talk with your son and he told me who owned the harmonica."

Bill Soltight rubbed his stubbled jaw. "Who?"

"Jasper named Zack Miller. Hung out in Barraby's Pool Room."

"Hung out?" Bill's eyes held a narrowing comprehension. "You mean he—"

"He's dead," Jim answered levelly. "So's his sidekick, Voss Garrett. And I reckon Monk Barraby's passed away, too."

Sheriff Soltight spun around on his stool. "Whoa!" he said. "You're moving too fast for me, Hatfield. Tell it to me again—slow!"

The Lone Wolf told him. "Someone beat me to Zack," he summed up coldly. "Just how he killed him I'm not sure. But Zack was killed because someone knew I was after him and he was afraid that Zack would talk. They were waiting for me when I went in Barraby, Voss and a couple of other gents."

Soltight shook his head slowly and shut his eyes against the pounding behind his eyes. "Who?" he whispered harshly.

"I don't know," Jim answered. He looked at this thick-shouldered lawman, wondering if Soltight was putting on an act. The sheriff could have feigned his hangover and beaten him to the pool room.

"Where were you, Bill?" he asked. "After I left the office?"

The sheriff's head came up and his eyes bored into Hatfield's. "Me? You don't think I—" Tendons swelled on his bull neck. "By gawd, I ought to take that badge off your coat and make you eat it, you damn—"

"It was a fair question," Jim cut in coldly. He took the marshal's Colt out of his pocket and placed it on the counter in front of the sheriff. "I had to take this away from that fire-eating marshal you're partial to," he explained. "He'll be looking for it by noon. When he comes to you, ask him how come he was the first one at the door when the shooting took place in Johnny Cruze's room? And ask him why he was waiting across the street when I went into Barraby's."

The sheriff's big hand closed over Lengo's Colt. He watched Hatfield slip off the stool and walk to the door; he could feel the blood pounding in his ears and the ache behind his eyes was sharp and real.

"Shot up Barraby's and took Sol's gun away from him." His voice was a dazed mutter. "Hatfield. Hatfield. Dammit, I heard that name before.

Doctor Lawrence Kleeman was a pale blond man over six feet tall with narrow stooped shoulders. He was treating a ten year old for a leg gash and the smell of carbolic salve was strong in the doctor's treatment room. He looked up with frowning impatience as Jim Hatfield entered.

"Wait in the other room, please!" he said sharply. Then he noticed the badge on Jim's coat and he shrugged. He finished bandaging the boy's leg in weary silence, patted him on the head, and let him go.

Alone with Hatfield now, he said, "What can I do for you?"

"I've come for some information," Jim answered.

"I thought you did," Doctor Kleeman replied. "You don't seem to be in need of medical attention."

Jim grinned. "You sound tired and irritated, doc."

"I am," the man answered. "It's surprising how many assorted ills can plague the population of a mining town. I seem to spend most of my time treating knife cuts, probing for lead slugs, bandaging cracked heads." He shrugged. "You the new sheriff?"

"No. I work for him."

Kleeman rubbed his eyes. "That's right, elections are still three months off. Shows you how little track of time I keep." He frowned. "I don't know the sheriff very well. He and Doctor Spenser are pretty friendly, and I imagine whatever professional services he might need of a doctor he gets from Spenser."

He turned and went to the door as someone knocked. He opened it and stuck his head in the other room and said, "Just a minute, Cy, I'll be right with you. Boils again, eh?" He closed the door and turned to Jim. "I'm afraid I'm very busy."

"I'll make it short," Hatfield said. "First, did you treat a man named Zack Miller for gunshot wounds in his left shoulder?"

The doctor frowned. "I don't recognize the name—and I haven't treated such a wound lately. Why?"

Jim ignored the question. "My second request is harder to put in words. I want to know what kind of medicine smells sweet, and can kill quickly."

Doctor Kleeman shook his head. "Might be a number of medicines," he said shortly. He walked to a glass-door medicine chest and took down a bottle. "This lethal medicine, was it taken orally?"

Jim shook his head. "I don't think so."

Kleeman frowned and put the small bottle back on the shelf and took down a larger, dark-brown one. "This, maybe," he muttered. He pulled the cork and gave Jim a whiff and jammed the cork back.

Jim nodded. "That's it, chloroform, eh?" He read the label. "Thanks, doc."

"Chloroform's bad stuff to monkey around with, deputy," Doctor Kleeman said worriedly. "Doesn't take too many whiffs to put a man to sleep—permanently."

"That's what I figured," Hatfield replied. "Thanks for the information, doctor."

HE LEFT Kleeman standing by the medicine cabinet, looking tired and puzzled. He knew what he had to do now. He knew how Zack had died. But there was one more thing he had to know and

DRY HUMOR

OIL was discovered on the land of a wealthy Texas rancher and not to be outdone by Hollywood, he immediately had three swimming pools built. . . . One he kept filled with hot water, the other with cold water, and the last was always empty—for those of his friends who couldn't swim.

—Al Spong

he had to make sure before he made his next move.

He left Kleeman's office and went directly to the stables where he had left Goldy. He saddled the sorrel and headed up the canyon trail.

Coming out of his office on Canyon Road, Doctor Spenser saw the Lone Wolf ride out of town toward the canyon trail. He stopped and watched Hatfield until the big Ranger had disappeared. Then he turned and backtracked until he reached the cubbyhole where Lengo had his office.

The marshal was not inside. Spenser came out and headed back for the Canyon House and then he saw Lengo step out of the sheriff's office. He waited on the walk until the marshal strode by; he jerked his head significantly and Lengo nodded curtly.

Doctor Spenser went back to his office and locked the front door and waited in the back room where he slept.

Ten minutes later Lengo came in through the back door. He closed it behind him and stood in the center of the room, a stocky, dangerous man with an ugly look in his yellow-gray eyes.

"He shot his way out of Barraby's," he said thickly.

Doctor Spenser jerked his head. "I heard about it," he said. His eyes behind the lenses were a hard, bright blue; the blandness was gone from them. "I told you he is the Lone Wolf, Captain McDowell's ace troubleshooter. He's no fool. Johnny Cruze must have sent for Ranger help."

"The Lone Wolf?" Sol Lengo licked his lips. He seemed suddenly less sure of himself.

"He's headed up the canyon trail," Doctor Spenser said coldly. "Looks as though he's headed for the mines. But he's got something up his sleeve, Sol. He went to see Doctor Kleeman. I just dropped in on my colleague, he says Hatfield was asking about chloroform. Once he starts putting two and two together."

"You'll hang!" Lengo retorted thickly.

"You'll hang with me!" Spenser said. "I've got Bill sold on the idea Johnny Cruze froze him out. He's wearing blinders to anything else. One more payroll and Johnny would have to give up. We'd have been able to pick up the railroad as cheap as he had bought it and pay for it with the money we stole from him!"

Lengo shrugged. "We got a bad break when Zack and Voss let Ramsey get away from them before I showed up. If they had caught up with him before Ramsey ran into Hatfield—"

"What happened can't be undone!" the doctor said sharply. "But so far Hatfield's only guessing. He hasn't told the sheriff who he is, or what he knows. He's riding right now on one of the most dangerous trails in Texas. If something should happen to him—"

Lengo nodded. "I'll make sure it does happen, doc." He rubbed the pit of his stomach. "I ain't underestimating him, but I'd like a chance to—"

"Don't be a damn fool!" Spenser growled. "Take Manny with you. See if you can overtake Hatfield on that trail. But whatever you do, don't try to face him in a shootout. Get to him first, before he knows you're after him. However you do it, Sol, just make sure Hatfield doesn't ride back to Paydirt!"

Lengo scowled. "He won't!"

CHAPTER IX

The Fastest Gun

THE TRAIL to Big Lars was a torturous grim climb that brought sweat to Goldy's sleek hide and lather to his lips. The rails followed the old trail most of the way, but there were times when the iron road branched off and crossed narrow chasms on trestle bridges that seemed flimsy and unsafe against the bold, jagged cliffs rising above them.

At one place the railroad tunneled through five hundred feet of solid granite, at other points it hung a thousand feet above the whitewater of Devil's Creek.

It had taken money, imagination and engineering know-how to build this short-haul railroad, and with the passing miles respect came to Jim Hatfield for the men who had conceived and carried out the building of this road. They had taken every natural advantage to keep the grade within operating levels, but Jim knew that even the powerful Mallet engine probably crawled at no more than a snail's pace up this winding road. And banking on this, he finally found what he was looking for.

Just beyond the midway point up to Big Lars the railroad wound past the narrow entrance of a feeder canyon. Jim turned into this offshoot and less than a hundred yards in, behind a bulge of rock, he found the signs where two riders had waited. The shoe marks of their horses made little imprint on the hard, gravelly earth, but a half dozen cigarette butts told their story and Jim's trained eyes made out the tracks of their mounts.

It told him what he had come to find, and it made clear what had been puzzling him. There was only one thing left to do now, to check with Johnny Cruze, and set his trap.

He swung back to the canyon road and down below him, on a bend of the hairpin trail he had taken, he caught a glimpse of two riders. They disappeared almost immediately, but Jim's smile had an iron hardness. He had expected he would be followed.

He put Goldy on the trail.

It was late afternoon when he rode onto the bench on Big Lars where the construction sheds, railroad siding and loading platforms and miners' shanties clustered.

Jim rode past the small depot, feeling the chill wind off the high peaks. He spotted a sign on one of the sheds, Lucky Strike Mine, Superintendent's Office, and rode to it.

Johnny Cruze was talking to two burly men in wool mackinaws when Jim entered. They turned and looked curiously at the tall stranger with the deputy's badge. Johnny dismissed them and waited, motioning Jim to a chair. His head was bandaged, but the color had come back to his face. He looked a little tired as he said, "I didn't expect to see you up here, Jim."

"I've got news," Hatfield said. "I found the men who killed Ramsey." He saw Johnny start; the slender man came forward, frowning. "You find the payroll, too?"

Jim shook his head. He told Johnny what had happened in Barraby's. "I think you were wrong about the sheriff," he said. "Bill doesn't like you; he thinks you beat him out of this partnership, as he says. He won't go out of his way, now, to help the railroad, but he's not trying to break you, Johnny."

"Who, then? Lengo?"

Jim shrugged. "It could be Lengo. It might have been Monk Barraby, too. But I've got a hunch." He thought a moment, eyes narrowed. "When is your next payroll coming up?"

Johnny turned and walked to a crude desk in a corner. He picked up a telegram and handed it to the Lone Wolf.

"Tomorrow," Jim read, a thin satisfaction in his voice. "Time enough. I've got an idea how to break this wide open, Johnny. We'll give the sheriff rope enough to hang himself, if he's the thief. But I've got a strong hunch he's not the fish we'll cacth."

"I'd like to believe that, Jim," Johnny Cruze said earnestly. "I don't see eye-to-eye with the old buzzard, but I had hoped he'd be my father-in-law some day."

Jim said casually: "She's playing hearts with her brother and eating her heart out for you. Go down and see her."

"But you heard her!" Johnny protested. "I asked her in the office—"

"With her father standing by," Jim said. "What did you expect? She's pretty loyal, and besides, have you tried to explain to her why you broke with Bill?"

"He broke with me," Johnny said, stubbornly. "I told him I didn't like the way he was sitting on his butt while all the trouble was going on, and—"

"He told you where to go," Jim finished, grinning. "Bill Soltight will be a hard man to live with, but he's Laura's father. If you're that interested in her, you'll have

to take Bill, too."

Johnny spread his hands in a weary gesture. "I want to marry the girl," he said simply. "I can handle Bill, if I was sure he wasn't trying to get back at me."

"We'll find that out tomorrow," Jim said. He turned and glanced through the window to the setting sun. "Looks like I'll have to put up here for the night. I don't think I'd like to risk going down that canyon trail in the dark."

"You're welcome to stay, Jim," Johnny said. "But the train's going down to Paydirt in an hour. You could load that big sorrel of yours in one of the cars and ride in the caboose with Jake."

The Lone Wolf nodded. "Fine." He turned to the door and Johnny said, "I'll come to the depot with you and straighten things out with the crew." He saw Hatfield stop on the low stoop and something in the big Ranger's stance warned him.

"What's the matter, Jim?"

"Trouble," the Ranger replied. His voice was grim. "I knew it was coming."

THE MAN by the depot had turned and was coming toward the Lucky Strike office. Two tired horses nosed the loading platform behind him, but only the marshal was in sight, moving toward the tall Ranger standing on the stoop.

The Lone Wolf's eyes made their quick appraisal of this man and moved on; he caught the glimpse of another, ducking swiftly behind the shed flanking the mine office and now he settled himself, knowing where his enemies were.

Behind him Johnny said, "He's got a nerve, coming up here." He turned, his voice lifting: "I've got a rifle in here somewhere."

"Keep out of this," Hatfield warned. He stepped away from the corner of the shed into focus.

Sol Lengo's stride dragged. He had a gunman's pride in the speed of his draw, and this pride had nagged at him since leaving Paydirt. He had taken Manny with him, but he had not been displeased when they had not overtaken Hatfield on the narrow trail. Yet now, as he came face to face with the big Ranger whose gun-speed was legend in Texas, he felt the first falterings of confidence.

The chill wind plucked at his coat sleeves. He felt the cold strike through him and a shiver shook him. The sun was gone and the light was fading.

He paused less than twenty feet from Hatfield, and glimpse of Manny at the shed corner bolstered his waning courage.

"You should have left the country when I told you, Hatfield," he said. "But you wouldn't listen."

"I'm listening now," Jim said bleakly. "What are you after?"

"You," Lengo answered thinly. He was balanced forward on his toes, in a half crouch, prepared for the fastest move of his life, and in that instant he threw in what he hoped would give him the edge in this balance between life and death.

"Get him, Manny. Now!" he yelled.

Whipsawed between the two men, the Lone Wolf moved with the blinding speed which had made his name a synonym for death throughout the long trails of Texas. He stepped forward and turned on his toes, like a dancer, and his right hand Colt flared across his waist. It was a snapshot fired without aiming; but it caught Manny between the eyes as the killer stepped clear of the shed and threw down on Jim.

The long knife blade flashed in the dying day, spinning end over end, high over Jim's head.

But the diversion gave Lengo his chance. He had his gun out and levelling when the Lone Wolf's left Colt shaded him. The marshal's gun exploded once, then he stood rigid, swaying, shaking his head with dogged defiance. He took a step forward and tried to lift his Colt for another shot. Then his knees jackknifed and he fell forward on his face.

Jim fingered the hole in his coat under his left arm. Lengo's bullet had cut through without touching the skin—but it had come close.

"A fast man," he muttered, and turned to the dark-skinned partner of the marshal who lay crumpled by the corner of the shed.

Johnny Cruze joined him. Men converged toward them, drawn by the shots. They clustered around the dead men.

Johnny Cruze said, "I think I had better tell them who you are, Jim," and the Lone Wolf nodded.

Later, in Johnny's office, the railroad man said: "I don't understand it, Jim. Lengo came up here gunning for you."

"I guessed he would," Hatfield replied. He stood by the window, watching the men still clustered outside. "I want you to do me a favor, Johnny. I want you to ask the sheriff to take the payroll up here tomorrow."

Johnny frowned. "If I lose that money, Jim, it'll break me."

"You'll get your payroll," the Lone Wolf promised. "And I'll get the man behind your trouble." He turned to the door. "One more thing. Can you trust your train crew to keep their mouths shut about what happened here just now? At least until after tomorrow."

Johnny nodded. "They'll do as I say, Jim."

SHERIFF SOLTIGHT left his office and was crossing the street to the Cafe when the train came in from Big Lars. It was dark, and clouds blotted out the stars. A cold wind prowled the canyon town; the sheriff buttoned his coat and stared morosely at the depot where the Canyon Railroad engine's headlight probed the darkness.

He was wondering what had happened to Jim Hatfield. His new deputy had been gone since late morning—from the time he had left Doctor Kleeman.

Soltight had gone to see Kleeman himself, and had returned to the office more mystified than ever.

The warmth of the Cafe invited him, and Bill was having his coffee when Doctor Spenser came in and sat down beside him. The doctor seemed preoccupied.

"Quiet tonight, so far," he said at length. "No broken heads for a change."

The sheriff merely grunted.

"How's Rick?" Spenser asked.

"Ornery and restless." Soltight scowled. "He's thinking about that girl in the Golden Nugget."

Doctor Spenser smiled. "Hell, Bill, you were young once."

"And maybe twice the fool," Soltight admitted. "But that don't mean I want to see him cross that bridge again to get his face beat in for the sake of some two-bit tramp."

"Leave him alone and he'll get over it," Spenser advised. "Check-rein him now and he'll see her just to prove to you he can."

The sheriff shook his head. "I want him to stay away from that part of town, Doc. That's Lengo's territory, and Rick doesn't get along with Sol."

Spenser shrugged. He took a sip of his coffee. "Where's your new deputy?" His voice was casual.

"Don't know," Bill growled. "Last I heard he went to see Doc Kleeman. Wanted to know if Kleeman had tended to Zack's wound. And what did chloroform smell like."

Spenser frowned. "What's he after, Bill?"

"Damned if I know," the sheriff snapped. "But there's been blood on the moon since he arrived here."

Spenser shook his head. "I didn't want to horn in, Bill. But I think Sol Lengo was right about him."

The sheriff eyed him truculently. "Lengo's sore because Hatfield pinned his ears back, Doc."

"Wait a minute," Spenser said, low-voiced. "Just what do you know about the man? He comes to town with Ramsey's body and a story about Ramsey holding him up and trying to steal his horse and being killed by two men he didn't know. He rides into town to see you, but he doesn't stop at the office—he rides on and comes into the Golden Nugget. Think about it, Bill. He's a stranger here—but in less than fifteen minutes in town he's had trouble with Packy Shane and Duke. And he's sassing Sol Lengo."

Doc paused. "Well, what about it?" Soltight asked.

"What's his business here?" Doc per-

sisted. "Did he ever tell you? Why did he change his mind and take you up on that deputy's job? What's he doing, nosing around, in Barraby's, and then asking questions of Doctor Kleeman? Where's he gone to now?"

Bill scowled. Doc's words hit home. Just what did he know about his new deputy?

He said stubbornly, "I don't have to be his wet nurse, Doc. I reckon he knows what—"

"There he is now," Doc interrupted, pointing.

The sheriff swiveled around and caught a glimpse of Hatfield riding Goldy past the Cafe. He got up and started for the door and Doc followed.

Hatfield had dismounted in front of the sheriff's office and was at the door when Soltight hailed him. The Lone Wolf turned in the doorway, moving quickly away from the light at his back, his big figure merging into the darkness of the building side. His voice came even in the night.

"Howdy, Bill. I was looking for you."

"I've been looking for you!" Soltight called. Doc's words had gotten under his skin. "Where in hell have you been?"

"On law business, Bill," Jim said softly. He put his gaze on Spenser who said coldly, "I heard you went to see Doctor Kleeman. Find out anything?"

"Only what I expected," the Lone Wolf said and smiled. He watched the two men come up the stairs. "I rode up the Canyon trail to the Lucky Strike," he said. "I wanted to take a look at the road in daylight."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You've been up on Big Lars? Since noon?" He turned and looked at Goldy nosing the rack. The big sorrel didn't look tired. "How'd you get back?" he asked in a rasping voice.

"By train," Jim answered levelly. "My cayuse rode in one of the cars. It was Johnny Cruze's idea."

Soltight straightened. Anger roughened his voice. "You're pretty thick with Cruze all of a sudden!"

"He was helpful," Jim said drily. "I've got no cause to be unfriendly." He took the note he had told Johnny to write from his pocket and handed it to the sheriff. "Johnny said to give you this." He watched Bill read it, stepping inside the office and close to the lamplight.

"So he expects the payroll to be in on the 7:10 tomorrow, eh?" the sheriff said, angrily. "And he wants me to pick it up and bring it up to the Lucky Strike?"

Jim shrugged. "That's what it says."

SPENSER cut in with dry amusement. "Looks like Johnny's putting you on the spot, Bill. His other two messengers doublecrossed him and stole the payroll."

"To hell with Cruze's payroll!" Bill exploded. "He can damn well come down to Paydirt and pick it up himself!"

"He's tied up at the mine or he would have," Jim explained. "But he did say that if you refused for me to take it up."

"You seem to be on mighty familiar terms with Johnny Cruze, for a man who's been a complete stranger here," Doctor Spenser said.

"I'm an honest man," Jim said.

The sheriff was rereading the note Hatfield had given him. "All right," he muttered. "I'll deliver that payroll tomorrow. I'll ram the damn money down his throat."

Jim shrugged. "I'll hold down the office then, Bill. But right now my stomach's reminding me I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. If you gents will excuse me."

Spenser cut in curtly. "Did you meet Sol Lengo on the trail?"

Hatfield paused in the doorway. "Why, no," he said truthfully. "Why?"

Spenser's eyes were coldly narrow behind his glasses. "I thought I saw Sol leave town about twenty minutes after you did. He seemed to be headed up-canyon."

Jim spoke softly. "It's a mighty treacherous trail he was riding then, Doc. I wouldn't be surprised if something did happen to him."

The doctor scowled. He started to say something else and changed his mind. He watched Hatfield turn and stride down the

stairs and head across the street and behind him Soltight said, puzzled, "Now what in hell did he mean by that, Doc?"

Doc Spenser didn't answer at once. There was fear in his eyes at that moment, a narrowing jumble of thoughts. So Manny and the marshal had slipped up? He looked through the doorway toward the dark mouth of the canyon, trying to envision what had happened. He shivered and turned back inside the office.

"If you've got any sense left, Bill," he said harshly, "you'll take back that badge you pinned on that gunslinger and you'll jail him. If you don't, you're a blind, damn fool."

CHAPTER X

Bare Knuckles

THE SHERIFF and Doc Spenser were waiting in the law office next morning when Jim Hatfield crossed the street from the Cafe and entered. The doctor was carrying his small black bag and Jim noticed the bulge of a shoulder holster under the unpressed black coat.

Soltight was checking stacks of greenbacks, putting them back inside a leather satchel on his desk. He shoved the last of them inside and locked the bag and stood up as Jim walked to the desk.

"Looks like a lot of money," Jim murmured. "The boys up at the Lucky Strike will be glad to see you, Bill."

A strange look crossed the sheriff's face. He let his hand slide from the desk to his hip; he glanced quickly at Doc Spenser who had moved up behind Jim, and with a quick jerk he pulled his Colt.

The muzzle levelled across the desk at Jim's stomach. It caught the Lone Wolf by surprise and he stopped, his eyes narrowing, judging the sudden temper in the sheriff.

"I know what you and Johnny Cruze have cooked up!" Bill snarled. "Get me to take the payroll up to Big Lars, then frame me for it. Well, I ain't falling for it, Hatfield!"

"Don't be a fool, Bill," the Lone Wolf said coldly.

"Fool, eh?" the sheriff cut in harshly. "I have been a fool. Letting you take over —letting you strut around town with a badge to cover you. Just who in hell are you? And where's Sol Lengo? He went up the casyon trail after you. Why ain't he back?"

Jim hesitated. He was being forced against the wall, knowing that the sheriff would not be swayed now, by anything less than the revelation of who he was. Yet to do so would probably jeopardize what he had planned.

He took a step toward the desk. "Listen, Bill. I—"

He caught a glimpse of Doc Spenser coming up fast behind him and he started to turn. Spenser's .38 came down hard across Jim's head. Hatfield fell across the desk, then slid to the floor.

The sheriff came around the side and looked down at the Lone Wolf's unconscious form. He glanced at Doc who was breathing hard, still holding his .38. The man seemed about to fire into Hatfield's unmoving body.

"Hold it, Doc!" Soltight snapped. "What in hell's come over you?"

Doc licked his lips. "Thought he was going to gun you, Bill," he said lamely. "I—I tried to stop him."

"You stopped him!" Bill nodded. He seemed undecided. "Damn it, maybe he is playing a game of his own, Doc. And then again, maybe he had his reason for waiting to tell me what he was after."

At the depot the train whistled a warning blast. Doc glanced out the window.

"We better get going," he muttered.

Bill nodded. "Help me drag Hatfield into one of the cells. He'll keep until I get back."

Relief brightened Doc's blue eyes. He gave Bill a hand and they dragged Jim's limp figure into the nearest cell and locked the door.

Soltight picked up the satchel. "Let's go, Doc."

THE TRAIN whistle penetrated Jim's fogged mind. He rolled over and sat up and ran his fingers through his hair, feeling gingerly the bump over his left ear.

The train whistled once more and he came to his feet, suddenly aware of where he was. The wind was coming in off the flats and it carried the sounds of the train clearly; he heard the clashing of iron couplings as the short-haul canyon train started to roll.

A feeling of helplessness gripped him. The Doc had put one over on him. He had not expected this turn of events. He had to get out and get out soon! He had to get up to that feeder canyon above the railroad before the train arrived, or Doctor Robert Spenser would do to Bill Soltight what he had done to Ed Minik and Irvin Ramsey.

Bill Soltight would disappear, seemingly with the Lucky Strike payroll, and few men, least of all Johnny Cruze, would believe that the sheriff had not deliberately jumped train and headed for the border with the money!

He had to get out!

Turning, he climbed on the bunk and peered out through the bars of the small high window. But this gave him view of an empty lot—he got down and was beginning to strip the bunk when he heard a step in the office. Hatfield spun around and came to the barred door in time to catch a glimpse of a skirt and high button shoes move across his angle of vision.

"Laura!"

She appeared in the doorway to the cell block, a slim, hatless girl who looked as though she had been crying.

"Jim! Where's dad? What are you doing in there?"

Her last question seemed foolish, but the Lone Wolf noticed that Laura Soltight seemed under tension and close to tears again. He told her, coldly, concisely, who he was, what had brought him to Paydirt, and why he was in the cell.

"You'll find keys in the office, Laura," he said. "I've got to get out of here. Or you'll never see your father alive again."

She turned at once, and a few moments later she was at the door, using a key. Jim pushed the door open and brushed past her, into the office. He found his guns in the desk drawer where Bill had put them; he checked them automatically before sliding the long-barreled Peacemakers into their holtsters.

Laura caught his arm. "Jim," she said helplessly. "I came for dad. Rick's gone! He's gone across the bridge—and he was carrying a gun."

Jim hesitated. Every minute that passed brought the train nearer to Soltight's rendezvous with death, every moment that passed meant that Goldy would have to make up on that narrow, treacherous trail high above Devil's Creek.

"Get over to the livery stable, Laura!" he said flatly. "Have the hostler saddle my horse—the big sorrel. He'll know. Bring Goldy across the bridge for me."

He paused then, long enough to rip the deputy's badge from his coat, toss it on the sheriff's desk. The girl watched with widening eyes as he reached inside his boot for the gleaming badge of the Texas Rangers and watched him pin that symbol of Texas law on his coat.

Then he was gone, a tall, grim man striding fast up Canyon Road.

The Lone Wolf heard the two shots while he was still across the street from the Golden Nugget. He broke into a run then, his boots spurting dust as he crossed the road. He reached the slatted doors of the gambling hall and shoved through them, a Peacemaker resting easy in his right palm.

The big gambling room was empty. Chairs were stacked along the far wall and tables were pushed up against them. The bar was deserted. But across that dismal-looking room, at the foot of the stairs, he saw Rick Soltight.

The sheriff's son was bent over the low bannister, with Packy Shane's thick arm around his throat, choking him. On the stairs, looking down, Duke Emerson stood in shirtsleeves and sleepy-eyed. He had a gun in his hand, but he seemed undecided as to what he would do with it.

Behind him several girls in various

stages of undress peered with bright curiosity.

A Colt lay at Rick's feet—Jim judged that the sheriff's son had tried to use it before Packy laid hands on him. But from the looks of the audience, no one had been hurt—yet!

Hatfield started to cross the empty room toward the stairs. His voice came sharp across the stillness.

"Let the kid go, Packy!"

The fighter's face was dark with leashed anger. He glanced over his shoulder to Duke, waiting for his boss' reply.

"Let him go," Jim snapped.

Duke's eyes were wide on the badge on Jim's coat. He licked his lips. "Damn it, who are you?"

Jim told him. "Let the kid go, Packy!" he repeated sharply.

Duke nodded quickly. "Do as he says, Packy. We don't buck the Rangers!"

The pug shook his head. "The hell with him, Duke! Nobody slugs me, not even a Ranger, without giving me a chance to get even." His arm tightened around Rick's throat and the helpless youngster gagged.

"Take off them gunbelts!" he told Hatfield. "Give me a crack at you with bare fists. Or I'll break this young fool's neck."

Hatfield's face was grim. The moments were fast slipping by. He nodded suddenly and stepped to the bar, unbuckling his gun belts and laying them on the counter. He stepped clear of them, facing Packy, and his voice rang clear across that empty room.

"Let him go," he said. "And let's get this over with!"

IT WAS a vicious, bloody fight with only Duke Emerson and a handful of unkempt dancehall girls as audience. Laura Soltight came in toward the end of it, unnoticed. She paused by the bar, her eyes widening at the bruising spectacle.

Packy fought the best fight of his career. He used every trick he knew, and he was fast and he hit hard. But it was not enough. It was a brutal fight, with Hatfield wanting only to end it fast and taking Packy's punishment to get in close and batter at the fighter's face and stomach.

It was a slogging, toe-to-toe brawl with no holds barred, and when it was over Packy lay sprawled on his face, a spent, quivering hulk of a man who would never be the same again.

The Lone Wolf turned wearily toward the counter. His lower lip was split and there was a livid bruise on his right cheek. His left eye was closing. His coat was split up the back and there was blood from his lip on his shirt.

He buckled on his cartridge belts and watched Laura take her brother's arm and help him toward the door.

"Get him home," he told her. "And keep him there!"

He pushed through the batwings ahead of them and found Goldy nosing the rail below. Jim climbed into saddle. The blood from his cut lip had a salt taste—his grin lopsided as he patted Goldy's neck.

"Give it all you've got, fella!" he muttered. "We've got to beat that train to the canyon cutoff."

Doctor Robert Spenser slipped the bottle of chloroform from his black bag into his coat pocket and joined the sheriff on the platform of the day coach hitched to the rear of the train.

The day coach was that in name only, for the main business of the Canyon railroad was to haul freight. But it did run a battered coach to haul the few passengers who made the trip between the mines and Paydirt.

This morning, other than the Doc and the sheriff, there was only one other day coach rider, and he was a drunken miner who had fallen asleep from the moment he staggered down the aisle and fell into a seat.

Spenser and the sheriff were alone on the platform at the end of the train. Soltight was smoking a cigar, his eyes brooding. He had the satchel with him, under his left arm.

They were more than four hours out of Paydirt. Above them towered the canyon walls, blotting out view of Big Lars, narrowing their field of vision, diminish-

ing them to the size of ants crawling through a crack in the towering wall.

The engine's laboring hammered against the unyielding cliffs, and the sound seemed to match the pounding in Doc Spenser's ears.

He did not regret what he was about to do. His only regret was that the game he had planned was over—the game he and Sol Lengo had planned together. A game whose stakes had been control of the Devil's Canyon Railroad and eventual control of the mines on Big Lars.

Hatfield's coming had changed that. Spenser had no doubt now that Lengo was dead. And Manny, also. And realizing this, he had known that the Lone Wolf was close on his trail.

Hatfield suspected, but the big Ranger would never be able to prove anything. Not anything that would hold up in a court of law. For the men who might have talked were dead—killed by Hatfield himself!

And after today the burden of guilt would be on Sheriff Soltight, who would disappear with the payroll somewhere along the right of way. It might not fool the Lone Wolf, but what could the Ranger do? He'd never find the sheriff's body, or the payroll, just as no one had ever found Ed Minik's body. Nor would they have found Ramsey, if Zack and Voss had not slipped up and let him escape before Sol Lengo had shown up to kill him.

SPENSER stood beside the sheriff and peered along the side of the coach. Just around the bulge ahead lay the feeder canyon where Zack and Voss had waited for Minik and Ramsey. But there would be no one waiting there now.

Beyond the canyon break the rails crossed a thousand foot gorge on a narrow trestle bridge. A long way for a body to fall.

The doctor slipped his hand into his coat pocket and gathered his handkerchief in a wad. With his fingers he started to work the cork from the bottle of chloroform.

The sheriff suddenly leaned forward, his voice heavy with surprise. "Doc, look! If that ain't Hatfield—"

Spenser's hand came out of his pocket still holding the bottle of chloroform. He saw the big golden stallion come around the bend behind them, sparks flying under the sorrel's shod hoofs. On that magnificent animal sat Jim Hatfield.

The train was moving at a crawl across the mouth of the feeder canyon. In another few moments the Lone Wolf would come alongside. Spenser dropped the bottle of chloroform and shoved hard against Bill Soltight.

The sheriff saved himself by catching hold of the iron railing. The satchel slid from under his arm, bounced off the step and disappeared.

He twisted to face Spenser, his face shocked. "Doc! What's come over you?"

Spenser's right hand came out of his coat with his .38. He chopped at Bill's head, trying to beat the sheriff off the train. Then he fell back toward the coach door as Hatfield loomed up close.

He cut down at the Ranger, triggering three wild shots. Jim's Colt boomed heavily. The slug knocked Spenser against the door, and the second pushed him over the side. He fell off the platform and rolled awkwardly across the roadbed.

They found the last two payrolls in Doctor Spenser's bedroom, hidden in the bottom drawer of his dresser. And Jim reconstructed the story for Sheriff Soltight:

"It was easy for Spenser," he said. "He got Minik and Ramsey out to the platform, the same way he got you, Bill. A handkerchief soaked with chloroform and held against a man's face works fast. He had Zack and Voss at that feeder canyon to pick up the payroll and the chloroformed messengers. I reckon he had a shack in the hills up by Calico Lake where Zack and Voss took their prisoner. Then, either Lengo or the Doc showed up, picked up the money and made sure the body would be dropped where it would never be found."

"Chloroform?" the sheriff muttered.

"Worked fast, and made no noise," Jim said. "Spenser wanted to make sure it

(Continued on page 100)

By EDWIN BOOTH

"Hang on!" Sam said, and slapped the mare with his hat

Sure As Shooting

Nancy Turner was plumb pretty,

but nobody dared court her on

account of the jealous gunman

—till Sam Daugherty came by

HE CAME in on the stage from Tucson, a young feller with a grin on his face, and not wearing a gun, which struck me as being somewhat uncommon. The gun, I mean, although the grin was a mite strange, too, it being one of them hot dry days, with a dusty north wind that was nasty enough to make a saint take to cussing.

Soon as he took his satchel from the stage driver, he stepped onto the porch of

the Maverick House, where I was sitting out of the wind, and grinned down at me real friendly. "Hello," he says. "I'm Sam Daugherty." He shifted the grip to his left hand, and stuck out his paw.

Now folks don't usually pay me no mind of late, considering me just a has-been that's too danged mean to cash in his chips. Except for a couple of old-timers, that is, who remember the days when folks treated me with more respect. Anyway, it tickled me a little to be spoke to so polite by this stranger, and I gave him a closer look, liking what I saw, even without the gun. I reached up for his hand, trying not to let him see how stiff my joints was getting.

"Cleve Hogan," I said. "Howdy."

This was all the encouragement he needed, it appeared, because he set down his satchel and pulled up another chair, acting like he might've made the trip just so as to make my acquaintance. "Nice town you've got here, Mr. Hogan," he said. "Real pretty."

"Yeah." I looked around for something pretty or nice he could've been talking about.

Through the yeller dust I could see half dozen shabby storefronts acrost the street, none of them painted except the Nugget Saloon, from which big flakes of paint was peeling loose.

"Yeah," I said again. "Real pretty. Pretty as a buffalo-waller in the rain."

He laughed, and I liked the sound of it, although I didn't let on. Then he stopped laughing and looked right at me real serious.

"All right," he admitted. "It's nothing but a battered little cowtown, if you go on what your eyes see. There's other ways of judging a place, though, to my way of thinking."

"Sure," I said. "There's your ears and your nose. I don't know about you, but my ears don't hear anything but the wind a-howling, and my nose tells me it's blowing from the livery stable. Not that I've got anything against the smell of good clean horse manure, but it ain't what I'd call pretty."

ABOUT then, I noticed that he wasn't paying much attention to what I was saying, and I turned to see him staring down the wooden sidewalk toward the mercantile.

"Wow!" he said, and I knew that Nancy Turner must've come out of the store, even before I hunched forward to look past him.

He took off his hat, and run his fingers through the reddest hair I ever seen this side of a Texas steer. He took a deep breath, and let it out in a soft sort of whistle, and he didn't blink until Nancy had gone into the dress shop. Then he turned to grin at me, looking a little dizzy. "I bet you won't try to tell me that *that* wasn't pretty!" he said.

"No," I said. "I ain't that blind. There's something I will tell you, though, for what it's worth. Don't go getting no ideas about Nancy Turner, not unless you hanker to get your brisket ventilated. I reckon you've heard of Kelso Kroeger. He's aiming to slap his brand on Miss Nancy, once she gets tired of saying no."

"Nancy Turner," he said. "Now there's a pretty name for you. Nancy Turner Daugherty." He shook his head, and put his hat back on, then added politely, "What was the other name you mentioned?"

"Kelso Kroeger," I said. "By grab, it's about time you started paying attention. There's easier ways of dying than being shot by Kelso." I didn't like the look on his face, so I added, "You've heard tell of the man, ain't you, mister?"

He nodded. "Kelso, the killer? Yes. I've heard about him." He began to grin again. "By golly, I've got to meet that girl. Time's a-wasting."

"It won't be a-wasting long," I said, "if you get any fool ideas like that." A thought struck me all at once, and I added, "You wouldn't by any chance be a gunslinger yourself—somebody that's looking for a fight with Kelso so as to get a reputation?"

"No," he said, his grin fading. "I'm not looking for trouble."

"Then what the tarnation are you look-

ing for? What's your line? Be you a gambler, or something like that?" For some fool reason, this young man was making me run off at the mouth like a danged woman.

"Gambler?" he said, and his grin came back. "Nope. It's worse than that." He looked me square in the eye. "I'm what you might call a student of psychology."

"Of who?" I asked. "The only Si I ever knowed was Si Hudgins. He runs that stable I was mentioning. Who's this Si Koligy or whatever, and what does he teach?"

He chuckled. "Never mind," he says. "It's something sort of new, and I don't reckon it'll do me much good around here. Anyway, I'm also top notch horse-breaker, and a champion guitar player. Got a solid gold cup to prove it, which I'd show you, only the bottom rusted out of it."

I settled back in my chair, feeling considerable relieved. "That's more like it," I said. "There's always plenty of work for a man that understands horses. Go talk to Pop Eshleman. He was mentioning he had some colts to be broke."

"Thanks. I'll do that." He reached for his satchel. "First off, though, I've got to meet Miss Nancy. Seems like I've been looking for her all my life." He looked down at me soberly. "Would you be so kind as to introduce us?"

It was pretty plain that he hadn't paid any attention to what I'd tried to tell him about Kelso Kroeger, and I begun to get a little peeved. "All right," I said, "but don't come blaming me afterwards, and don't forget to tell somebody about your nearest kin. Somebody's got to pay for the burying."

"Sure," he said. "Here she comes now." He took off his hat and stood watching her, like a kid seeing his first Christmas tree.

NANCY turned away from the dress shop, and come toward us, the wind whipping her dress around in a way that would've got me all excited when I was younger. Tell the truth, Nancy was pretty enough to make even an old goat like me turn his head and wish he was young again. And as sweet as she was pretty, too, being one of the few young folks who always had time to treat me as if I was still somebody important. She smiled at me now, then looked up at the young stranger with what seemed like more than usual interest before glancing back at me.

"Hello, Mr. Hogan," she said. "You're looking fine today."

I untangled my gunbelt where it had snagged on the arm of the chair, and managed to get to my feet. "You're lying, and you know it," I said. "I look like I'd been drug behind a team of fast mules, and then dipped in sulphur." I nodded toward the young man. "This here scamp is Sam Daugherty. For some fool reason, he wants to make your acquaintance."

She was grinning at me, but I could see that there was a little bit of worry in back of the grin, and I knew she was wondering if Kelso might come out of the saloon. She turned to look at Sam Daugherty, and her grin faded.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Daugherty," she said. "I'm Nancy Turner."

"He already knows that," I said. "The danged fool—"

Neither one of them was listening, so I shut up. Daugherty had quit grinning, and was looking at Nancy real serious, like he was worried about what she might think of a man who said exactly what was on his mind. I didn't blame him, either, when he opened his trap, because he come straight out with it.

"I think you're the prettiest girl that ever lived," he said. "I guess I might as well tell you right now—I'm planning on asking you to marry me."

It was the first time I'd ever seen Nancy at a loss for words. Her chin fell, and she looked at the feller like she expected him to turn into a pumkin or something.

"Not right now," Daugherty added, real quick. "Not till I get a job, and tell you some things about myself. I wouldn't expect a girl like you—"

"For heavens sake!" Nancy found her voice, and her eyes snapped. "Of all the

unmitigated nerve!" She whirled around and gave me a funny look. "You forgot to mention that this gentleman was out of his mind, Mr. Hogan." She swung back to face the stranger. "Apparently Mr. Hogan gave you the wrong impression, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is."

"Daugherty," he said. "Sam Daugherty."

"Never mind. I won't be using it for anything." She kept frowning at him, but there was something queer about the frown, as though it wanted to slip off and skeedaddle. Before it did, though, she turned on her heel and swished down the walk, her beautiful little figure bouncing angrily.

I looked up at Daugherty. "Was you born foolish?" I asked. "Or did you learn that from your friend Si?"

He rubbed his chin. "It's been my life's work, Mr. Hogan. I guess I'm about as foolish as a feller can get." He tried to grin, but it didn't quite come off. "You see, I was trying to take her by surprise. I reckon she don't surprise easy."

He looked so unhappy that I couldn't help feeling sorry for him, even if he had acted like a muttonhead. "Don't let it throw you, son," I said. "Only next time, try using your head." I glanced at the bare spot on his leg where a gun should've been hanging. "And you'd better start wearing a gun, if you know how to use one. It ain't going to take long for word to get around, and Kelso ain't going to like it—not that Kelso ever liked anything, except Kelso."

His hand fell to his side, like he was expecting to feel a gun there, but he shook his head. "What's the difference?" he said, glumly. "She won't have anything to do with me now, anyway." He stooped over to pick up his grip. "Well, thanks for the introduction. It wasn't your fault it didn't work out." He turned and walked slowly down the porch, and went through the door into the hotel.

I LOOKED acrost at the saloon, half expecting to see Kelso come busting through the batwings, but nothing happened, and I remembered that he'd have no way of knowing, not until somebody went over there to report. Thinking of Kelso made me mad, and I looked down at my old single-action pistol, hanging there at my side like it always had, but about as useless now as poker chips at a church social.

Doggone it, I thought, why couldn't this newcomer be a sixgun artist? It was time somebody come along to run Kelso off the range—somebody that a girl like Nancy could hitch up with, and have a chance at being happy. And instead, along comes this young feller that doesn't even tote a gun.

By the time I'd eased myself down into the chair again, the hotel door swung open and a little whisky drummer come out onto the walk, ducking his head into the wind. I'd never liked the man, and I liked him less now, as he bowed his shoulders and headed across for the saloon. Knowing the drummer like I did, it was a cinch he'd listened in on the conversation between Sam Daugherty and Nancy, and that now he was busting his galluses to tell Kelso all about it.

Sure enough, it wasn't thirty seconds until the batwings slammed open and Kelso bolted out into the street, his little eyes slitted down above the black whiskers he was too lazy to shave off. He stomped acrost the road, the drummer tagging along behind, looking like a dwarf in comparison. Three or four other men come out of the saloon behind them, acting like they expected to see some excitement.

Kelso stopped on the edge of the porch, and gave me a mean look. "Where's that stranger?" he said.

I gave the look right back, being too danged ornery to be bluffed by a man like Kelso. "I didn't take him to raise," I said. "Go find him yourself, if you've got to see him for something."

Kelso's gun hand dropped to his side, and he swore, then he started for the hotel. Before he reached the door, Sam Daugherty come out onto the porch, still looking unhappy. He seen Kelso and stepped aside, thinking Kelso was aiming

to enter the building, but Kelso moved aside with him, and spread his feet apart.

"You're new around here," he said. "Are you the feller that was talking to my girl?"

Daugherty looked up at him in some surprise, then his eyes hardened as he took in what Kelso had said.

"I was talking with Miss Nancy Turner," he said. "I don't remember her mentioning that she was your girl."

"Well, by hell, I'm mentioning it!" Kelso backed off a step, and turned so that he could make a quick draw. "I'm warning you, mister. Stay away from my girl, or you'll wish you had."

I looked for some sign of fear on the young feller's face, but all I seen was that grin again. "Thanks for the warning," he said. "After that, it's only fair for me to return the favor. In just about ten seconds, I'm going to knock your front teeth out."

Kelso was too surprised to move for a second, and I fumbled around and got my gun out of the holster and thumbed back the hammer. "He ain't armed, Kelso!" I yelled. "Don't go for your iron!"

Kelso looked down to see if I was lying, then he wiped the back of his hand across his thick lips, and pulled back his right fist. "You danged fool!" he said. "Don't you know I'd just as lief kill you with my bare fists?" He let go with the right.

Daugherty hadn't been standin' there day-dreaming. His fist lashed out and caught Kelso in the mouth. Even from where I was, I could hear the teeth crunch.

"I tried to tell you," Daugherty said, and stepped inside Kelso's roundhouse swing, sinking his fist into Kelso's belly. It landed so hard that I couldn't help grunting. Kelso doubled over like a wet grain sack and slumped down on his hands and knees.

IT WAS the first time I'd ever seen anybody best Kelso in anything, either guns or fists, and I was so excited I forgot all about my joints and jumped out of the chair. "Hit him again!" I hollered. "Kick him in he gizzard!"

Kelso shook his head and staggered to his feet, his hand dropping to the gun in his holster. Then he remembered me and turned in my direction, his eyes red and mean. "I won't forget this, Hogan," he said, spitting out a few teeth. He turned back toward Daugherty. "You're fast with your fists, mister, but that ain't the way we settle things hereabouts. Go get yourself a gun and face up to me like a man." He glanced over his shoulder and squinted at the shadow of the hotel. "By the time that shadow reaches the cottonwood, either be ready for me out in the street, or be out of town."

Daugherty's grin disappeared. "I'm not looking for a gunfight," he said. "Why don't we just put this up to Miss Nancy? She's the one that's got to decide."

Kelso shook his shaggy head. "You ain't getting off that easy, mister. Either fight or get out. I'll take care of Nancy."

Daugherty stared at the ground a minute, then seemed to make up his mind. He glanced around at the circle of men, then at me. "I'd like all of you to remember something," he said. "I tried to keep this from coming to a gunfight. Do you agree?"

The men began to look at each other a little oddly, and didn't speak, but Daugherty pointed at them one at a time and waited until each of them nodded. "How about you, Mr. Hogan?" he asked. "Will you testify that this wasn't my idea, when the time comes?"

I nodded, too, beginning to suspect something that made me plenty happy. "Kelso asked for it," I said. "We ain't liable to forget."

"Thanks." Daugherty turned to face Kelso. "You'd better go and get ready, stranger," he said. "I'm real sorry about this."

Kelso licked his smashed lips. "Get ready?" he said. "What the hell! I'm ready any time."

Daugherty shook his head, and I thought he looked a little regretful. "There must be things you'll want to tend to," he said. "The shadow won't reach

that cottonwood for an hour or two."

"By then the eastbound stage'll be gone," Kelso said. "You better be on it." He turned and walked across to the saloon, pausing once to glance back over his shoulder, then disappearing through the batwings.

Daugherty watched him out of sight, then looked at the men in the street. "If you gentlemen don't mind," he said, "I'd like to have a little private conversation with Mr. Hogan. Something I don't want the whole town to know."

The men glanced at each other, then headed toward the Nugget. All except the whisky drummer, who went into the hotel, giving us a sneaky look. When they was gone, Daugherty come over to where I was standing.

"I'm mighty sorry about this, Mr. Hogan," he said. "I don't reckon a girl like Nancy would think much of a feller that gets into a gunfight as soon as he hits town." He shook his head. "It isn't going to make a very good impression, I'm afraid. That's why I want all of you to explain who started it."

"To blazes with who started it!" I said, about ready to bust. "You better be worrying about who's going to end it. You act like it was all cut and dried and you're sure to win."

He looked puzzled for a minute, then sort of grinned. "I hadn't thought about that, Mr. Hogan. I suppose something could go wrong." He glanced down at my side. "I'd like to borrow your gun, if you'll be so kind."

"You betcha!" I said, and began to unbuckle the belt. "Unless you won't feel right using a stranger's gun."

"It shoots out the front end, doesn't it?" he said. "Just like any other gun of that type?"

I decided to give it one more try. "Maybe you didn't hear me the first time, son. About this Kelso Kroeger, I mean. His gun shoots real bullets, and he ain't going to be aiming over your shoulder, neither. If I was you, now, I'd be doing some thinking on whether to fight or leave town."

HE REACHED out and took the gun, buckling the belt in the same hole I always used. It hung nice and low on his leg, making him look a lot more like he was all dressed. I waited for him to shift it around a little, but he didn't seem to pay it no attention, his mind being elsewhere.

"About that horse-breaking job," he said. "What was the man's name again?"

"Eshleman," I said. "Pop Eshleman. He's over at the livery stable right now." It struck me that this was a crazy time to be worrying about a job. "Dang it!" I said. "You can think about that later on, if you're able to think about anything. Right now, you better be getting the feel of that gun. You've just got an hour or so before that shadow reaches the cottonwood."

"An hour? That'll give me a chance to talk to Mr. Eshleman. I'll be back in plenty of time." He grinned. "Don't look so worried, Mr. Hogan. There's other jobs, if I don't land this one." He stepped off the porch and started toward the stable, then turned around and come back, scratching his chin.

"There's one thing I won't feel like doing afterwards, so I'd better take care of it now. I think it's only fair and square for me to take care of the burying expense. After all, this wouldn't have happened if I hadn't come to town." He turned to point toward the edge of town, where our little graveyard was barely in sight through the dust. "I guess there's somebody I can hire to dig the grave and maybe make a cross or something?"

"You'll find a feller over at the livery stable that generally does that sort of stuff," I said, not stopping to think. "But doggone it, this ain't—"

"I suppose you spell Kroeger with a 'K', don't you?"

"You sure do," I said. "Listen, son. I got to know something. If you're good enough to go up against Kelso, how come you wasn't even wearing a gun?"

He looked at me square. "I made a promise, Mr. Hogan. My mother asked me—" He broke off, looking miserable. "I

hope she'll understand."

"Shucks," I said. "This is something you couldn't help."

"Thanks." He turned away toward the livery stable.

The wind let up just then, and I heard a noise behind the window at my back. A second later the little whisky drummer slipped out of the hotel and scuttled across the street, not even looking my direction. The dirty little varmint must've been listening all the time, even after Daugherty had said that he wanted to talk about something in private.

I reached for my gun, although I don't reckon I would've used it. At any rate, it wasn't there. I got up and hobbled into the hotel, planning on borrowing another one. With a gunfight coming up, I didn't aim to be caught half-dressed.

When I come back out, the whisky drummer was standing with his back against the front of the hotel. I was about to say something, when I seen Sam Daugherty coming back from the livery stable, looking pleased as punch. He stepped onto the hotel porch, and sat down, shifting his holstered gun a little.

"I got the job," he said. "Mr. Eshleman said I could start in the morning." He was all grins again. "Eshleman's place is right next to Turner's."

"Having lived here all my life," I said, "that last information don't come as much of a surprise." I set down next to him and pointed at the gun I'd borrowed and stuck in the top of my pants. "Just in case," I said.

"That was thoughtful of you," he said, "but it wasn't necessary." His grin was gone again. "I took care of that other matter, too. That man you told me about, he's making a cross for Mr. Kroeger's grave. I paid him to dig the hole, too. He'll have it ready by the time it's needed."

I could see that Daugherty wasn't the least bit uneasy, and I began to calm down some myself. "He'd better get at it," I said. "That shadow ain't got far to go."

Just about then, the whisky drummer pushed himself away from the building and trotted across to the saloon. "Dirty little rat," I said. "He ought to be tarred and feathered."

Daugherty didn't seem to be paying attention, any more than he was paying attention to the way the street was deserted, or the fact that Doke Thomas had put wooden shutters over the windows of the mercantile. He looked at me real serious. "She must be about nineteen, isn't she?"

"Who?" I said. "Oh, you mean Nancy. I reckon so. Why?"

He grinned. "Just three years younger than I am. By the time she's twenty-two and I'm twenty-five we ought to have a couple of younguns." He poked my ribs. "If Nancy's agreeable, we'll name the first boy Cleve, after you."

I was tickled. "That's right nice," I said, before I stopped to think. I frowned at him. "Doggone it, you're having kids and naming 'em for me, and you ain't even asked the girl to marry you—or got rid of Kelso Kroeger." I leaned forward in my chair, and squinted at the streeet. "There goes the eastbound stage," I said. "And you ain't on it."

"So I ain't," he said, and watched the stage go by in a cloud of dust.

I pointed at the street. "The shadow's reached that cottonwood, son."

"Right again," he said, and got to his feet.

EXCEPT for the wind, it was deathly quiet as Daugherty stepped out into the street. Then there was the sound of a galloping horse, and Nancy Turner rode up in front of the hotel and pulled her little mare to a stop. She was looking real upset about something. Daugherty took off his hat and moved over to look up at her.

"It's real nice seeing you again so soon, Miss Nancy," he said, "but you'd better get out of sight for a few minutes. There might be a little trouble."

Nancy hadn't stopped to change her clothes, and her long dress was all bunched up across the saddle, so that her pretty legs was in plain sight clear to the knee. Ordinarily, she would've been flus-

tered, but she didn't seem to be paying this any attention at the moment.

"That's why I'm here," she said, real angry. "There's no sense in this. You've got no right to fight anybody about me."

"So you heard about it." Daugherty looked anxiously toward the saloon. "I'm afraid it's too late now, Miss Nancy. I wish you'd please get out of the way." He looked up at her, and added, "It wasn't my idea, Miss Nancy—it was your friend's. He said—"

"Don't call Kelso Kroeger my friend! I wouldn't marry a killer like him if he was the last man in the world."

Daugherty's face lit up. "Honest, Miss Nancy? You mean he's got no claim on you?" His grin faded. "Doggone. I'm afraid this thing has gone so far now that there ain't any way of stopping it." He suddenly raised his hat over his shoulder. "Hang on!" he said, and slapped his hat against the mare's rump. The little animal took off with a snort, and Nancy was busy staying aboard. Daugherty turned toward the saloon.

"Come on out, Kelso! The shadow's past the tree."

Nothing happened for a second, then the batwings began to part. I looked at Daugherty. "Get ready to draw, dang it," I hissed. The crazy loon was standing there with his arms folded across his chest.

The batwings finished opening, and Kelso Kroeger came out into the road. He was frowning, and didn't seem very crazy about the whole business. I got the idea he wouldn't have come out at all if there'd been a way out of it.

Daugherty grinned at him. "You're late, Kroeger," he said. "But what I've got to do won't take long." He quit grinning. "I've arranged everything the best I could. Now let's get it over with."

Kelso licked his lips with the end of his tongue. "Just a minute, stranger," he said. "Maybe we sort of got rushed into this thing." He squinted hard. "Seems like I've seen you before. What'd you say your name was?"

"Never mind my name," Daugherty said, real sharp. "Either fill your hand, or get the blazes out of town. I ain't got time to argue." He uncrossed his arms, and let his hand move an inch or two towards his gun.

"Hold on!" Kelso shot his hands above his head, and backed toward the saloon. "I ain't taking on no gunslinger! I'm getting out!" He turned and ran back into the saloon. A door banged somewhere, and there was the sound of a galloping horse.

I was too surprised to move until men began pouring out of the saloon. The bartender was in front, wiping his hands on his apron. He came halfway across the street, and stood there staring at Daugherty.

"Stranger," he said, finally, "what did you say your name was?" It was the first time I'd ever heard the bartender talk real polite.

Daugherty took off his hat and wiped his forehead. "Sam Daugherty," he said, and grinned.

The bartender shrugged. "If that's the way you want it, Mr. Daugherty, that's the way it'll be." He turned around to the other men. "Ain't that right, fellers?"

They all nodded, and the bartender faced Daugherty again. "Whatever you call yourself, Mr. Daugherty, you sure didn't fool Kelso. The way he's traveling, he won't stop till he hits the gulf of Mexico." He grinned, and stuck out his paw. "I'd be proud to shake your hand, mister."

Daugherty took the bartender's hand, but he frowned. "Now don't go jumping at conclusions," he said. "I'm no gunslinger, in spite of what Kelso said. I just bluffed him, that's all. Why, I can't hardly hit a barn from the inside. Just look." He pulled my old gun out of his holster real awkward, and looked around for something to shoot at. There was a weathervane on top of the saloon—one of them things with a big rooster made out of tin. He cocked the gun, took careful aim and pulled the trigger. The rooster didn't even move. He looked sort of embarrassed. "Shucks. I thought I'd at least knick it."

The bartender began to laugh. "You

mean Kelso ran off from a man that he could've shot left-handed?" He slapped a hand on his leg. "By grab, he'll never show his face around here again!" He put an arm around Daugherty's shoulders. "Mister, this calls for a drink." He waved his arm. "It's on the house, fellers."

Daugherty grinned. "Thanks, bartender, but I'll have to take you up later." He turned toward where Nancy was riding slowly toward us. "I've got something else to tend to right now."

The bartender saw Nancy, and winked. "Any time, Daugherty." He headed back for the saloon, the other men trailing along behind. The drummer started to hold back.

"You, too," I said, and he took off like he'd been spurred.

NANCY was taking her time getting back to the hotel porch, and Daugherty came over beside me and took off my gunbelt. "Thanks, Mr. Hogan," he said. "It was mighty neighborly of you."

"Hmph," I said. "A lot of good it would've done if your bluff hadn't worked."

"Ain't it the truth," he said, handing me the gun.

Miss Nancy was up to us now, smiling a little to herself. Daugherty reached up to lift her out of the saddle and set her on the porch. It seemed to me he could've turned her loose a little quicker, but she didn't seem to notice.

Daugherty looked down at Nancy real serious. "I got me a job, Miss Nancy," he said. "Right next door to your place. I likewise have a little nest-egg salted away. Not much, but it'd give us a start. With Kelso gone, maybe there ain't anything to keep us from getting married, unless you're ashamed to marry a man that can't shoot a sixgun." He sounded real humble, for once. "I'd be right proud, if you was to say yes."

Nancy looked down at me and crinkled up the corners of her eyes. "He's a fast worker, isn't he, Mr. Hogan?" Then her smile faded, and she looked at Daugherty mighty solemn-like.

"I wouldn't marry a killer, Mr. Daugherty. You know that already. But I might marry a man who had a chance to kill and didn't take it. I'm pretty sure I'd marry a man who let himself look a little foolish, just so as to keep folks from getting the idea he was a gunman. It's just that I'd have to be sure which man it was I'd be marrying."

Daugherty looked down at her a minute like he was making up his mind. Then his grin came back. "Shucks, Miss Nancy," he said. "I don't reckon I'll ever want to fool you about anything."

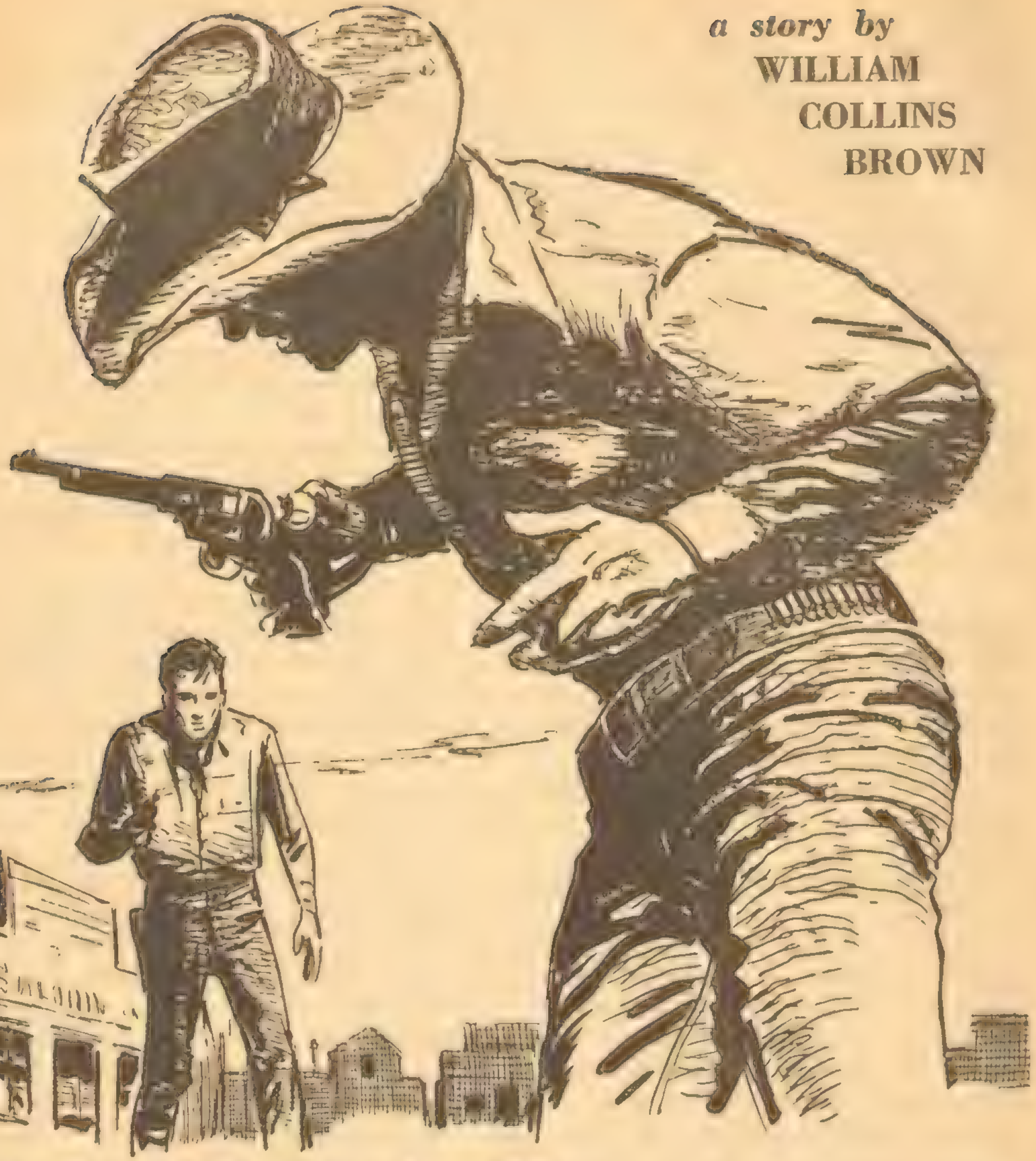
He glanced around to see that the street was still deserted, then reached down to take the old gun out of my holster. His arm moved so fast I could hardly follow it, and the gun began to jump in his hand. I stared across the street where it was pointing. The weathervane was whirling like mad. Before I could catch my breath, the gun was back in its holster again.

Across the road, the batwings came open and the little drummer poked his head out. He craned his neck to look up at the spinning rooster, then stared across the street again, his eyes popping. It was pretty easy to see that he figured it was me who had done the shooting, being as I had both guns. I patted the gunbutt and yawned, then drew the gun out of its holster and rared up like I was about to take a shot at him. He let out a squeal and ducked back into the saloon, and I knew that from now on folks was going to start calling me 'mister' again.

It tickled me some, and I turned to mention it to boy and girl beside me, but it wasn't any use.

Shucks, they didn't even know I was around.

a story by
WILLIAM COLLINS BROWN



GUNSMOKE REP

It would take quite a man to kill

Midge Miller in a gunfight

—and the boy wasn't yet a man

MARSHAL MEL EGAN'S pinched gaze travelled out across the dusty street and settled in grave speculation on the youthful stranger dismounting in front of Stackpole's Livery Stable—and concluded that trouble had returned to Red Rock.

From his relaxed position with his scuffed boots resting atop the ancient roll-top desk, Egan counted back nine days to the date on the calendar bearing the most recent X pencilled across it. Nine blissful days without trouble in Red Rock!

With a deep sigh of regret, Marshal

Egan pulled the makings from his red calfskin vest, and long, bony fingers meticulously rolled a cigarette. Dark hair had long ago acquired a frosty tinge, and the combination of years and the troubles of a peace marshal had etched firm lines into lean features. Eyes the color of the pale smoke curling around his features, hardened. The contentment that had been his a moment ago flowed from his being.

Nine days. Egan's memory retraced the nine days of peace in Red Rock. Nine days since Hellroarin' Hastings had shotgunned old One-Eye Blodgett out there in an argument about fence cutting. And old One-Eye had evened up things—and made it easy on the marshal—by cutting down Hellroarin' with an old Sharps sidehammer. The old buffalo rifle had slammed its .50 slug through Hellroarin' and a hundred yards further down the street killed Pete Welby's broomtail mare. Egan had promptly awarded old One-Eye's horse to Welby for damages; Hank Grimes, an undertaker of sorts, happily had whisky money again, and the uneasy peace returned to Red Rock.

"And now comes trouble, damn it!" Marshal Egan muttered regretfully, certain that today would put another X on the calender.

Marshal Mel Egan had worn the badge too long to go hunting for trouble. However, the lawman's life had taught him that the best way to head trouble when he saw it coming was to meet it head on.

"Probably young and foolish," Egan muttered, frowning. "Out to show the world all of a sudden how tough he is!"

He dragged his feet off his desk and watched from his doorway as old Stackpole limped into the stables, leading the stranger's deep-chested, but gaunt sorrel. The stranger threw one glance about him then strode toward the Maverick Saloon, the red powdery dust of Red Rock puffing around shiny new black boots. His black hat was set grimly low over eyes that Egan imagined danced with grim intent. The sixguns were shiny new too, and so were the elaborately handtooled holsters and full cartridge belt. There was a youthful, devilish swing to lithe hips and full broad shoulders as he moved with purposeful stride. What Egan saw confirmed his first conclusion.

"Dammit," he muttered.

He stepped out into the white glare of the sun, and old Stackpole eyed his approach, sluffing his weight to his good leg.

"I saw you eyin' the young stranger," he said, thinking to wheddle a bit of inside information. "Got a dodger on him?"

"Dunno." Egan's squinted gaze travelled to the stranger's jaded sorrel, thinking it was thirty miles back the way he'd come from Coyote Wells.

Egan patted the horse's damp neck, the fresh pungent odor of sweat strong in his nostrils. "Damned near rode his legs off. What'd the follow look like?"

"Young. Good lookin' kid—but something's eatin' him." Stackpole gave Egan a steady look. "There's a burr under his saddle and he's gonna buck."

"So I figured," Egan replied. "What'd he say?"

"Wanted to know if I'd heard of a fellow named Midge Miller."

Marshal Egan's jaws went tight. "What'd you say, Stackpole?"

"I said, 'sure, who hasn't?' "

The etchings in the marshal's face cut deeper, smoky eyes holding Stackpole. "What else?"

"He wanted to know if Midge had been around. I told him I run a stables and not a missin' persons bureau. I told him that anyone could put up here that had the cash, and I didn't give a damn what his name might be—and had better sense than to ask."

The tension in the marshal's face eased, then broke into a grin. "Stackpole, for once I can appreciate a liar."

MIKE BARLO had a worried look. He owned the Maverick Saloon, and he knew from experience what just one hellraiser could do to the back bar of mirrors, bottles and glasses in one wild moment of riot. When he saw Egan push casually through the batwings, a flood of relief swept over his beefy face. And the mar-

shal saw at first glance that the newcomer wasn't wasting any time.

"I'm buying," he was saying. "And *everybody's* drinking!"

The damn fool, Egan thought. He's inviting someone *not* to drink with him—and someone is damn apt to take him up!

Midge Miller was conspicuously absent. But the others weren't exactly the right fellows to walk up to and kick in the shins. Take Gig Hawkins, the big unshaven fellow at one of the poker tables with one arm swathed in bandages, shuffling a poker deck with his good hand. Two weeks ago while driving the Coyote Wells stage, he had responded to a lone bandit holdup attempt with a blazing Colt. He got a busted arm for his nerve—and a dead bandit.

And those riders of the Dry Prong outfit having a friendly poker game among themselves at the near table. Just two months ago they had out-ridden and outgunned double their number of rustlers, capturing one. When Egan got the news and rode out, they had already strung him to a cotton wood limb. When Egan inquired of their haste, Jim Dane, the owner of Dry Prong replied: "What the hell? The coyote was gut-shot and would have died anyway in two-three days. We did him a favor."

The young stranger stood at the bar facing the poker tables, his back toward Egan. Egan moved up alongside. The youth held high a bottle of whisky, his fuzzy chin jutting determinedly.

"Everybody drinks," he called.

There was a general drift toward the bar, except the four Dry Prong riders. They looked up from their game with mild irritation. The stranger fastened a hard, challenging eye on Jim Dane, and Jim's features went grim. Slowly he laid down his cards and, as the youth dropped a hand to his shiny new holsters, eased back from the table for room, anger flushing his features. One of the Dry Prong riders broke the building tension when he shrugged, grinned wryly and held up an empty glass.

"Why not, pardner? My glass's empty."

The Dry Prong riders pushed back their chairs and moved to the bar. Mike Barlo shook his head grimly and wiped his apron across a beaded forehead and poured drinks.

Egan studied the youth from the corner of his eye. Tall, lithe, good shoulders. A jutting, stubborn chin that hadn't known a razor, and the beginning of a blond whisker crop that would have hardly teased a good Wade & Butcher. The intense blue eyes danced recklessly, with one drink already a riot of fire in his veins.

When his eyes finally caught Egan's badge, he jerked straight and frowned. Unconcealed resentment shown in his eyes.

"A damned town marshal," he muttered, turned and gulped a drink.

"There's one in about every town," Marshal Egan replied easily.

Bitterness shown in the youth's eyes as he stared into the big mirror as though penetrating the past. "There was one in Dodge when a lone bandit robbed the bank and killed my dad. But he stayed in his hold like a rat until the trouble was over."

"So you hate all town marshals." Egan summed it up for him.

"Sort of."

With mingled anger and irritation, Egan studied the brash youth. Why, he was hardly dry behind the ears. He didn't know how to wear those new holsters, the big Colts looked pinched in them and he doubted if they'd unshuck without a hard yank. He sure as hell needed some coaching if he were to live long! "What's your name, son?" he finally asked softly.

"Wesley. Ben Wesley." He spoke the name with evident pride.

"What do you want of Midge Miller?" Egan put the question bluntly.

It caught Ben Wesley off guard. "How'd you know?" he demanded. Then he said, "Oh, that damn livery stable man."

Egan put the question again and saw Ben Wesley's lithe frame grow taut, his young features freezing into a passion of hate.

"When I find Midge Miller—I'm going to kill him!"

Ben Wesley had spoken in a loud ringing voice. Every man in the Maverick heard. A quiet settled, like the heavy smoke and liquor scent of the atmosphere. Men shot silent glances at one another, to stare with pretended absence at their liquor glasses. Mike Barlo's towel squeeked loudly as he twisted it in a glass.

"I guess it's lucky for you, son, that Midge Miller ain't here," the marshal said, holding his gaze.

"Some day I'll catch up with him," Ben Wesley promised, with brutality in his voice.

MARSHAL EGAN recognized the problem he faced. Someone would tell Ben Wesley that Midge was riding guard on the Coyote Wells stage. And that it was due in Reed Rock at sundown. And he knew that this hot-blooded, vengeance-bound kid would meet that stage, and that Midge Miller would kill him.

Whatever secrets lurked in Midge Miller's lurid past, Midge was no coward. His victims died facing him. With Midge it was professional pride, for he had a gunsmoke reputation to defend. He was long, lithe and leathery-faced with the cold green eyes of a coyote; eyes that completely camouflaged his intents and thoughts, complementing the deadly speed of his guns. Midge was somber, aloof. He knew he was a marked man. One can't go around killing without trampling the toes of the living. Midge knew he had enemies—bitter enemies.

Yes, Egan knew Midge would kill Ben Wesley and the questions, if any, could come later. He, himself—and the kid—needed more time; needed it desperately. Egan made his bid.

"Midge Miller," Egan told the kid quietly, "is riding guard on the Coyote Wells stage."

Ben Wesley's strong fingers gripped Egan's arm. "When is the stage due?" he demanded.

"It ain't due in until after dark," Egan replied. He looked about, a flashing warning in cold eyes at the fellows about him, repeating, "Not until after dark."

Marshal Egan moved toward the batwings, paused, saying: "Come to my office. I got something else to tell you."

When Marshal Egan moved out into the sunshine, he sucked in a deep breath and shook his head. "Dammit all," he muttered.

He went directly to the stables. "Now listen carefully, Stackpole," he said. "The minute the Coyote Wells stage pulls by, flag it and tell Midge Miller to come directly to my office that I've got something mighty important to tell him. And whatever you do don't mention this kid that just rode in. Savvy?"

The marshal sank wearily into the creaky chair before the old desk and gave the calendar on the opposite wall an uneasy glance. If he could keep Ben Wesley from running into Midge until he'd had a chance to talk to Midge, maybe . . .

But he finally shook his head grimly. Midge was a killer, not a runner. Even if the would-be gunman was a kid still wet behind the ears, Midge wouldn't run from a gun. When a man has a gunsmoke rep . . . Still, he had to try.

Marshal Egan sat in gloomy pondering. The only audible sounds the gentle whispering of the cottonwood leaves in the big tree out front, and the listless pounding of blacksmith Pete Garner's anvil down the street. The westering sun began to slant into his open door. And then a long shadow filled it.

Ben Wesley stood there tall, lithe, a bit defiant. "You said there's something you have to tell me?"

Ben's eyes levelled with the marshal. He cast a suspicious glance toward the unoccupied iron-barred cells at the back, and dropped his hands by his holsters.

Marshal Egan felt Ben Wesley's hard, distrustful gaze on him. He rolled a cigarette, letting the wariness ease from the youth. When he lit the cigarette, he smiled. "I'm not going to lock you up, Kid. Not unless you make trouble."

He saw the youth suck in a deep breath,

relaxing a little.

"First," Egan said, "I want to know why you're gunning for Midge Miller."

"That's my business," the youth replied tightening up again.

"You came here to kill a man," the marshal snapped, levelling eyes like smoky ice. "That makes it my business! I maintain the peace in Red Rock, even if I have to kill to do it!"

Defiance flamed into the youth's face, and Egan knew he'd have to try another angle. He shrugged, dragged on his cigarette, and smiled again. "You run away from home, Ben?" he asked softly.

"I don't have a home," the youth snapped.

The marshal saw he'd finally penetrated. "No?"

"Seems I been on my own about all my life. My dad was killed—murdered—when I was about five. Murdered by Midge Miller!"

"I sort of figured that, son," Egan replied, watching a smoke curl. "Where's your mother?"

"She's dead, too. Died when I was about twelve, I guess. Maw didn't talk much about my dad, but he must of been pretty wild. Dad had gone up trail, and he didn't come back. Finally word came that he had been killed."

Egan, studying the youth through his cigarette smoke, saw the smoldering hate rising as his memory travelled back.

"I've been a hand on first one spread then another since I was twelve, saving my money. Saving just to buy me the outfit I got now and go after Midge Miller. I knew he was still alive, for every once in a while someone would mention Midge Miller—or someone he'd just killed."

THE kid talked on, and it was evident to Marshal Egan that he'd lived on bitterness and hate, sustained by the crave for vengeance. Ben Wesley had lived with one objective in life—to kill Midge Miller. But as the kid talked, he saw fleeting moments of abject loneliness cross the youth's eyes, and suspected the show of tough challenge at the Maverick was at least in part to bolster his own resolutions.

"Do you know Midge Miller?" Egan asked.

The youth shook his head. "Never saw him in my life. It's just the name I've been following."

"That's sure dead against you," Egan commented. His eyes ran down to the new cartridge belt and holsters. "Can you really use them guns?"

Ben Wesley's face flushed. "This morning I knocked down a running jackrabbit the second shot!"

"You call that good, Ben? A few weeks ago I saw Bit Evans drop three jackrabbits that jumped up all at once before they got started good. And with just three shots. And just three weeks ago, I saw Midge Miller put two bullets through Bit Evans—before Bit could clear leather!"

The marshal's narrowed gaze searched Ben's face for the effect of his words. They had none, unless to raise the obstinate outthrust of Ben's jaws.

"Let's just suppose a miracle," the marshal continued quietly. "Suppose the miracle of you killing Midge Miller. Then what, Ben? Where would it leave you? You who've spent your whole life with that one objective, find and kill Midge Miller. The man who beats Midge Miller in a fair fight with sixguns can feel big. You'd have a gunsmoke rep from Santone to Dodge and back to Tombstone. You figure you'd earned the crown and you'd wear it and nobody'd ever be big enough to knock it off?"

"Maybe—" Ben Wesley felt the hard handles of his two new Colts, eyes aglow with zeal—"maybe I would be top gun! Maybe there are a lot of Midge Millers that ought to die!"

The marshal shook his head, knowing he'd failed, and feeling a little sick. He wondered if he was getting old, losing his touch. There was a time when he'd handled a case like this by slamming his sixgun alongside the fellow's head and throwing him in the jug until he had a change of heart or gladly hightailed it out of town. But this kid, Ben Wesley, just

didn't fit any patterns. He knew with a certainty that the kid would face Midge Miller with sixguns—and die.

He ran his eyes over the kid again. "Those new holsters," he began, starting all over again, "they ain't broken in to fit your guns. Everything's too new. Your guns look like they're wedged in, frozen. Let's see you flash iron. Pretend I'm Midge Miller. Go on, draw."

Ben hunched, hands tense. Then he slapped leather and Egan saw those new stiff holsters cling stubbornly to those guns.

He shook his head. "They're holding onto your guns like gumbo to a boot." He arose, took off his belt and gun and handed them to the youth. "Take yours off and try mine. We're about the same size."

Ben obediently took off his belt and put on the marshal's. It felt good. He lifted the Colt experimentally several times, and finally grinned back at Egan.

"Sure feels good all right, Marshal."

"You want to wear it?"

Ben felt the belt, patted the holster, and took out the worn, battered Colt, and rolled the cylinder against his palm, eyes warm.

"Gee," he muttered. "I bet this gun's killed a lot of outlaws, eh Marshal?"

"Well," Egan smiled a bit sadly. "That old Colt has seen some mighty rocky times in its day!"

Egan opened a desk drawer and took out two boxes of .45 shells.

"The only way to get the hang of a holster and the heft of a gun is to use it," he said. "It's still a couple of hours until dark. Saddle your horse, Ben, and ride south about two miles and you'll come to a rocky ravine where you can get in some good shooting practice all by yourself. Practice the quick draw and fast shot. And better save a little of it for dusk—that tricky hour after sunset."

Egan grinned shrewdly as he watched the kid saddle and ride south. That would get him out of the way until after dark, and give him a chance to talk to Midge Miller.

A BREEZE swept up from the southwest, the leaves of the big cottonwood rattling with cool sound. The cicadas started an incessant chirping from the patch of mesquites out back, and the sun grew red and low, and finally tipped the crest of the Catamount range.

For several moments before it hove into view, Egan listened to the rattle and cluck of the approaching Coyote Wells stage. Then it burst around the point beyond the blacksmith shop and came lurching down the street, the four mules strung in tandem, the driver alone on the high box.

Midge Miller rode inside like any other passenger. Midge had said it was foolish to ride out top, probably thinking of the easy ambush target he'd make for personal enemies.

Marshal Egan watched as Old Stackpole limped out and flagged the stage. The driver kicked on the brakes, hauled back on the reins, bringing the coach to a rocking halt amid a cloud of red dust. He saw Midge Miller's long form emerge from the coach, and saw old Stackpole approach talking, and saw Miller turn and look instinctively toward his office. The driver kicked off his brakes, popped a long whip and the stage lurched forward, heading for the hotel with its lone passenger, freight, and mail.

The lanky form framed itself in the marshal's doorway an instant, then stepped forward. "You want to see me, Marshal?" Wariness was in his low flat voice. His long arms hung with limp readiness, hands casually brushing low-swung Colts.

Midge Miller had killed three times in Red Rock. Each time he had stood over his victim with forgotten Colt curling smoke and bitter disdain in his somber features. Someone always seemed to be gunning for Midge Miller, trying to build a gunsmoke reputation. Probably only old Hank Grimes profited from their folly; he got two dollars a grave up there on the cedar ridge, and it helped to keep him in whisky money.

Midge stood before Marshal Egan, tall, gaunt and dust-covered. The outthrust

chin had a short sandy stubble, features hard and somber. The dusty hat set low over deep set pale green eyes, the emotionless, unfathomable eyes of a coyote.

"Midge," Egan spoke the words slowly, dispassionately, "I want you to saddle up and leave Red Rock—before dark."

In the dead stillness that followed, Egan could hear his own pounding temples. And then Midge laughed, a hard, brittle chuckle.

"You crazy or something, Marshal?"

"No Midge. I'm asking it as a purely personal favor."

"Why?"

"To prevent another killing in Red Rock, Midge. Someone hit town today, gunnin' for you. He's just a kid, Midge, maybe seventeen. He's not up to meeting an old gunslinger like you."

"You think I'll run?"

"I don't think you'd run from any man's gun, Midge. But this is a special case."

Midge shrugged. "I don't trail you, Egan."

"I've talked with the kid, Midge," Egan continued, studying the cold green of the gunman's eyes. "Take my word, Midge. It would take more guts to duck out than to stay and kill the kid."

Egan could see he hadn't penetrated into Midge's conscience, if he had one. Midge stood there with his eyes fixed on him, every killer instinct within him alive and wary.

"What's the fellow got against me," Midge demanded gruffly.

"Says you murdered his father when he was a kid."

Midge looked puzzled. "Sure beats me." He shrugged, grinned coldly. "But then I don't check back on the families of men who come gunnin' for me, either."

"Maybe you ought to do just that," Egan replied.

Midge laughed. A hard animal sound that made the hackles rise on Egan's neck. "You ought to know, Egan," Midge said, "that one can't run away from that sort of hombre. That kind never quits until a bullet stops him. I'd always be runnin' and lookin' back over my shoulder."

Midge moved toward the door, paused, saying coldly:

"Tell your man I'll be around to accommodate him—anytime he's ready to make his play!"

Midge stepped out onto the board walk, and Egan heard his booted steps fade away. He sat there a moment motionless, a void throbbing at his midsection. The cottonwood leaves outside whispered in the rising breeze, then boots sounded again.

Midge Miller stepped back through the doorway. "Who is this hombre that's gunnin' for me, Marshal?" he demanded.

"Wesley. Ben Wesley."

Midge Miller repeated the name slowly. He moved toward the chair and sat down, staring at Egan, a peculiar burning light in his green eyes. He arose, strode slowly to the door, turned.

"I'm riding out, Marshal," he said hoarsely. "Out over the Catamounts. But tell Ben Wesley I headed for Coyote Wells."

EGAN stared, stunned at the suddenness of Midge's about-face, wondering at the magic of the name of Wesley. With a feeling of elation, Egan moved toward the door, stared after Midge. It was sundown, and if Ben didn't get back into town until dark, Midge could be well out of Red Rock. And then Egan's train of thoughts came to a grinding halt. The horseman dismounting across the street there in front of Stackpole's stables was Ben Wesley!

Midge Miller and Ben Wesley spotted one another the same instant, and each seemed to know instinctively that the other was his man. Midge had already stepped off the board walk into the street and was standing wide-legged, long arms dangling by the black butts of his Colts, and electric alertness in his lanky frame.

Ben Wesley dropped his sorrel's reins, staring with fixed intensity, slowly moving forward. Ben reached within twenty feet of Midge before he stopped.

Marshal Egan stood in his doorway

watching, stunned with a sick feeling of failure and helplessness. Dully, he heard Ben Wesley's clear voice ask: "Midge Miller?"

"Yes. You Ben Wesley?" Midge replied.

Gray shadows had settled down from the Catamounts. From a nearby butte, a lonely coyote gave a dismal howl. Old Stackpole stood as though paralyzed outside the stables, staring. The Dry Prong outfit came noisily out of the Maverick's batwings, saw the tableau and froze.

Then young Ben Wesley's right hand stabbed toward the holster. It was a frantic, clumsy draw. Midge Miller's right hand jerked instinctively, but it was Ben Wesley's gun which bounced twice in flaming thunder.

Midge Miller half turned, faltered, settling down heavily on the board walk, his Colt still in leather. Then with a stiffled groan, he rolled over on his face.

Ben Wesley stood there staring a moment, then he holstered Egan's gun he was wearing and walked slowly to the marshal's office.

"I saw it—a miracle," Egan was muttering. "Midge Miller never cleared leather!"

They dragged Midge's limp form into the office. It was gloomy in there, and Egan lit his swinging coal oil lamp. Midge's shirt front was sticky with blood, and he was breathing hard. He motioned that he wanted to be alone with the marshal.

"Marshal—there's something I want you to know," Midge whispered hoarsely. "It's about that boy—Ben Wesley. I—I didn't kill his father."

Egan's senses whirled. Had Ben Wesley spent his life hating the wrong man? Egan saw that Midge was dying, and that he wasn't lying.

"Ben's dad, Jim Wesley, was a wild one," Midge continued. "Didn't like being tied to—apron strings. Jim went up trail, leaving a wife and a five-year-old son. He robbed that bank in Dodge, planted identification on a stranger killed in the hold-up."

Midge held on grimly. "The stranger was buried as Jim Wesley and word was sent back to Jim's wife."

Marshal Egan stared in shock as the truth slammed into him. "Then you—you are Jim Wesley?" Egan said.

"Yeah—" Midge held on through a paroxysm of pain, then grinned ruefully at Egan. "Funny, ain't it? Jim Wesley set a trap, and twelve years later Jim Wesley stumbles into his own trap!"

Midge coughed again, and his hard fingers bit into Egan's arm. "Don't tell the kid, Marshal. Let him have his dreams. But make him hang up his guns."

Ben Wesley's tall form entered quietly. He looked down with awe at the still form of Midge Miller. "Dead?"

The marshal nodded, sighed and stood up, fixing a sturdy gaze on Ben. "That miracle Ben. You'll have a gunsmoke rep. You're top gun now. You going to wear the crown?"

Ben Wesley shook his head slowly, puzzled, taking off Egan's borrowed belt and gun. "I *didn't* beat Midge, Marshal. I was scared and when he refused to draw —I couldn't stop."

Old Stackpole poked his head in the door, and Egan told him to go get Hank Grimes. Then he put an arm gently on Ben's shoulder. "What we need is a batch of hot coffee. Let's go home, Ben."

But first the marshal crossed the room and put a big X across the date on the calender.

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KETCHUM

Move Out

McGregor was a hard, high-handed cattleman, but his son couldn't see any fun in killing nesters, especially one as lovely and spunky as Francie Capehart

THEY journeyed west day after day, making their own trail across the vast, rolling prairie lands and into the hills. They passed a hundred likely spots which would have suited Mary Capehart, but whenever she suggested they might have come to a good place to settle down, Ben would shake his head and say, "No, Mary, this isn't it. I've seen the place in my mind's eye many a time. When we get there, I'll know it."

"There will be mountains near by,"

"She's bluffing," McGregor scoffed. "Go on, she won't dare use that rifle."

Or Fight!

Joel would remind him.

"Aye. Tall, majestic mountains."

"And neighbors?" Francie would ask.

"Maybe not at first," Joel would answer. "But neighbors will come and settle near us, for it will be a good land."

Joel was eleven, that year. Francie was thirteen. Both were tall, thin, and each had the same, wiry build as Ben Capehart. They rode the two extra horses which had been brought along in addition to the double team which pulled the wagon. The wagon was heavily loaded with supplies, boxes of household goods, blankets and clothing, a stove, a plow, and a harrow.

Finally, far ahead, they could see the mountains, a long, low, blue gray ridge against the western horizon. For days they seemed no nearer, but gradually they grew in size as the country grew more rugged. They came to a stream and followed it, then branched off to follow another. Three days later one of

the front wagon wheels broke.

It was afternoon when the wagon wheel broke. Ben climbed down to examine it. He shook his head, wearily, then glanced at Joel and Francie who had ridden up nearby.

"Start gathering wood," he ordered. "Lots of wood. It'll take most of a week to whittle and re-spoke the broken wheel."

He went on staring at it after the two children rode away. He was planning what would have to be done, the blocking up of the wagon, the digging out of the old spokes, the whittling of the new. He didn't hear Mary when she first spoke, calling his name. He answered her the second time without being consciously aware of it. He said, "What is it, Mary?"

"This is the place," Mary said.

"What place?"

"The place for our farm. The place where we'll settle down."

He straightened up at that and glanced from side to side. They were in a wide valley, that was partially wooded. There were hills on either side and on to the west were high, snow capped mountains. A wide stream watered the valley. It was a nice place, all right, but it wasn't the place he had seen in his dreams. He shook his head. "No, Mary. This isn't the place."

"But it is, Ben," Mary said quietly. "Look at the earth. It's good, rich earth. In this meadow I can see corn and wheat growing. We will build our house over there, near that stand of timber where the children are gathering wood. We have protecting hills around us and not far ahead are the mountains you promised to Joel."

"It still isn't the place," Ben said. "We'll repair the broken wheel, and drive on."

"No, Ben," Mary said. "We will stay here. It is here I will live and die. Waste no time on the wheel. We have a house to build and a meadow to plow and sow."

It wasn't often that Mary spoke with such firmness. Ben took another sweeping look at the valley. It was a pretty place, all right, and the earth did look rich. He knelt down, broke some of it free, and rubbed it between his hands.

Mary climbed down from the wagon and waited for him to stand up, then said, "Walk with me to the trees, Ben. We'll pick the site for our home."

He was scowling. This wasn't the place —or was it? Did a man ever find in exact detail the realization of a dream, or did he instead take something near to it and fashion it into the substance of his dream. Still puzzling over this he found himself walking toward the trees at Mary's side.

THE years had been good when they were newly married, then bad times had come and they had lost almost everything of tangible value. Here, the years were good again. They built a new home and farmed the soil, Joel grew to manhood and Francie became a young woman. They found a market for their crops in a cow town which was a three days' drive away. The neighbors Ben had promised his daughter failed to show up, but Francie didn't often complain. She helped her mother in the house, she worked in the fields, and she often accompanied Joel on his hunting trips. Mary worried sometimes that she was growing up wild, but there didn't seem to be anything to do about it.

It was all cattle country to the east and occassionally cattle drifted into their valley. Occasionally also, men came after them, and once a dark bearded man rode up to their house to see them. He introduced himself as Carl McGregor and said he owned the land to the east, and he gave them a warning. "This is government land you're squatting on. You've no right here. You'd best pack up and leave."

"I know it's government land," Ben Capehart said, agreeing. "I checked with the land agent in town. He says that someday it'll be put up for sale, and that when that time comes, anyone living on it can file a claim to whatever portion of it he's using. When that day comes, I'll file my claim and pay for it."

"With what?" McGregor snorted.

"Squatters never have money."

"I'll have it," Ben said quietly.

McGregor made an angry sweep of his arm, as though to brush aside further argument. "You still would save yourself trouble if you moved now. This is all cattle country around here. It'll stay that way."

Mary was worried after McGregor left, and Ben was worried, too. He made a special trip to town to have another talk with the government land agent. He felt better when he returned. The agent had promised to notify him if the valley was put up for public sale. This would give him time to file his claim.

Another year went by, and another. Joel was eighteen and Francie was twenty when they saw McGregor again, and this time he wasn't alone. Eight men were with him when he rode up to their home. Most were middle aged, or older, but one, Francie noticed, was young, and had a clean cut look about him. The way he looked at her brought color to her cheeks, but she forgot all about him when she heard what McGregor had to say.

He was a blunt, direct man, and he wasted no words. "You're squatting on my land, Capehart. I'll give you a week to move off."

"Your land?" Ben repeated. "How come it's your land."

"I've bought it and paid for it," McGregor snapped. "And I mean every acre in this valley. The public sale was announced months ago. Here's the deed to prove what I'm telling you."

He leaned over and held out a paper. Ben Capehart took it, looked at it without reading it, and then handed it back. There was a confused expression on his face. "I don't quite understand it," he said slowly. "The land agent promised to notify me if—"

"You were notified, but you didn't file your claim."

"No, I wasn't notified," Ben insisted.

McGregor shrugged. "It makes no difference now, any way you figure it. This valley is mine. It's bought and paid for. You're trespassing. Pack up and move."

An angry color darkened Ben Capehart's face, but he held his temper in check. "No, I'll not pack up and move out. If you own this land, I'll buy it from you at a fair price, but it isn't right that I should have to move."

"The land's not for sale, Capehart," McGregor said. "I'll give you a week to get your things together and move."

Ben Capehart said nothing.

"Did you understand me?" McGregor asked. "I said a week. One week."

Ben still was silent, but Francie noticed how straight her father was standing, and the way his fists were clenched. Mary was tight faced with worry, for she knew that although her husband was slow to anger, when it swept over him his anger was a terrible and reckless thing.

McGregor gave another expressive shrug. "Enough's been said. I expect to start moving my cattle into this valley tomorrow. Don't get in my way, Capehart."

He wheeled his horse and rode away, followed by the others. But one of them delayed. The young man. And he made a comment, staring straight at Francie as he spoke. What he said was, "Sorry, folks." Then he rode on after the others, but a little distance from the house, he looked back and waved.

BEN CAPEHART started for town within the hour. He made the trip, there and back, in four nights and three days, and was completely exhausted when he returned home. Discouraged, too. He had talked to the government land agent, who insisted a man had been sent to notify him of the land sale, but Ben was sure the land agent hadn't been telling the truth. He had talked to an attorney who had offered him little hope, but who had said he would do whatever possible. And he had talked to the sheriff who had warned him bluntly to pack up and move out.

They had a family conference that evening, after Ben had slept most of the day. It was an inconclusive conference.

"We'll fight," Joel said. "We'll hold our land against them."

At eighteen, he was tall, thin, freckled, and had clear blue eyes and light curly hair. He was a dead shot with a rifle. He knew the ways of the forest but he could work all day in the fields, and keep up with his father.

"No, we can't fight," Ben said. "There are only four of us. McGregor has twenty men riding for him. Four against twenty wouldn't stand a chance."

"Then we can move again," Mary said. "But my heart will not be in it. I like it here. I never thought to leave."

"And I like it here," Francie said "When Mr. McGregor sees we are determined, perhaps we can reason with him."

"I don't think McGregor is a man you can reason with," Ben said. "He doesn't have that kind of reputation, but maybe the attorney I spoke with in town will be able to do something."

"He gave us only a week to move on," Joel said angrily.

"A day or two more should make little difference," Mary said.

The years had turned her hair gray, but she still had a slender, youthful body, and her laughter when she was happy was as merry as Francie's.

McGregor rode into the valley again the next afternoon, and again he brought a number of men with him. One, Francie noticed immediately, was the same young man who had whispered he was sorry when he rode away four days before. He had dark eyes and a thin, sun tanned face, and this time he was frowning when he looked at her. After a single glance at him, Francie was careful not to look his way again.

"The weeks more than half gone," McGregor said sharply. "I see no signs that you're packing up. Don't you think I meant what I said the other day."

"I've been to town," Ben said. "I talked to an attorney."

"I know that, too. He's my attorney. He'll be able to do nothing for you. The best attorney in the country, couldn't. The law is the law, Capehart. It says this land is mine."

"I should have been notified it was up for sale," Ben said.

"You were notified."

"I wasn't."

"The land agent says you were, and that was enough to suit the purposes of the law. I'm telling you again, Capehart. Pack up and move."

Long hours and days in the fields had bowed Ben's shoulders so that he ordinarily looked stooped and tired. But he could stand as straight as any other man, and he did now, rearing back and looking up at McGregor.

"There are higher laws than the laws of men, McGregor," he cried defiantly. "There are moral laws which supercede those we have written. This land is mine. I will not give it up."

"Then we'll drive you out," McGregor shouted.

"How?" Ben asked. "With your guns?"

"Yes. With our guns if you make it necessary."

Ben glanced at Joel, at Mary, at Francie, then he looked back at McGregor. "Four bullets should do the job nicely," he said, smiling. "Go ahead, McGregor. Don't let a little thing like murder stop you from taking the few acres we are farming. Use your gun."

A curiously baffled look crossed McGregor's face. He touched his holster gun, but didn't draw it. He stared at Ben for perhaps half a minute, then leaned forward. "Don't try to bluff me, Capehart. You and your family are moving out of the valley. If you're not gone in four days, you'll regret it long as you live."

He wheeled away after he had said this and his men rode with him. This time, the young man Francie had noticed, didn't linger to offer them any encouragement, nor did he look back and wave.

THE next day McGregor's cattle started moving into the valley. They came in a long, thin column, half a dozen men driving them. By dusk, several

bunches of the cattle were within a mile of Ben's unfenced fields.

"They'll be into our corn by morning," Ben said at the supper table.

"I'll shoot the first one in the corn," Joel declared.

"No, you won't, son," Ben said. "We can afford to lose a crop. We won't be the first to cause trouble. We'll just sit the next few days out and see what happens."

Joel didn't agree. He left the table angrily, and went outside. Francie helped her mother with the dishes, then followed Joel. It had grown dark by this time but down on the river, maybe half a mile away, she could see the fire of the men who had driven the cattle into the valley and who were remaining with them. She called her brother but he didn't answer, and after a momentary hesitation she walked a little distance toward the fire, then stopped.

The night was silent, and warm, and there was only a slight breeze in the air. The blanket of stars in the sky didn't give off much light. She couldn't distinguish any movement near the fire, but she began to wonder about the men who were there—what kind of men they were. She particularly was wondering about the young man who had said he was sorry and whose eyes had been bold that first day McGregor had stopped here.

At twenty, Francie was tall, and slender, and in the full bloom of womanhood. Her skin was clear and she had nice features and light colored, soft hair. She knew she was attractive to men. As long as four years ago, men had looked at her when she went to town with her parents, and on each trip since then, several had been venturesome enough to speak to her. But she knew no more about men than she had learned through living here with her father and brother. She had her dreams—dreams of someone who someday would come riding into the valley and woo and win her and carry her off as his wife. Come to think of it, the young man riding for McGregor looked very much like the man of her dreams.

She flushed, shook her head, and then called Joel again, but he didn't answer her. Turning, she started back to the house. She had taken only a step or two, however, when she heard a sound off to the left. She glanced that way, saw a vague, indistinct figure, and caught her breath.

"Francie," a strange voice said. "Francie, I'd like to talk to you a minute."

She knew instantly who had spoken. She knew it was the young man she had been thinking of, but why she was so sure of it, she didn't know. And why she just stood there and waited for him to approach, without being afraid, was another mystery to her.

He stepped forward through the darkness until he was quite close. He was tall, so tall she had to look up to see his face. He had pulled off his hat and was twisting the brim around in his hands. The starlight showed her how grave he looked, and that a frown creased his brow.

"How did you know my name?" she asked.

"The storekeeper in town told me."

She smiled. "Mr. Schultz? He's a very nice man."

"He didn't know whether to tell me, or not. He thinks you have a right to stay here in spite of the way the law reads."

"We do!" Francie replied immediately.

A faint smile touched his lips. "Maybe I agree, but the law reads the other way. And father is very determined to have this valley. He has always wanted it."

"Mr. McGregor is your father?" Francie said slowly.

"Yes. My name is Ray McGregor."

Francie stood silent for a moment. She knew it wasn't right to try to turn a young man against his father, but Ray already had said he didn't think they should have to move. She looked up at him thoughtfully. "Why do you have to have this land?"

"We don't," Ray said, "but it's circled by hills and will make a good winter pasture."

"Why can't it be a good winter pasture with us here?"

"How can we run cattle in a valley when there's a farm smack-dab in the middle of it."

"Our farm isn't smack-dab in the middle of the valley," Francie said. "It's off in one corner. If our fields were fenced your cattle still would have plenty of room for grazing."

"I argued that way last night," Ray said, "but my father didn't agree. He grew up on a range east of here, saw it cut up for farms and ruined as cattle country. He came out here to get away from farmers and to have a land he could call his own—a land that would be all cattle land. I wish he wasn't like he is, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"You mean, he's going to try to make us move?" Francie said.

"I'm afraid he is."

"What if we refuse?" she asked.

"Then he'll move you."

Francie stiffened. "I'd like to see him try it."

"He'll try it, all right," Ray said frowning. "That's what worries me. If you try to stay here, someone's going to get hurt. I wouldn't like it if you got hurt."

FRANCIE smiled, but looked away so he wouldn't see her smile, and in looking away she saw something else—the crouching figure of Joel. The starlight glistening on the barrel of the gun in Joel's hands. Fear stabbed through her. She lifted her hands quickly to her throat, and cried, "No, Joel! Don't! Don't!"

Joel stood up, holding his gun leveled to cover Ray McGregor. He spoke in a harsh, excited voice. "Get off our land, Mister. Get off and stay off."

Ray had turned to stare at him. He made no answer, but instead, spoke to Francie. "Shall I go?"

"I think you'd better," Francie said. And then in a louder voice, "Joel, you're not to fire that gun. Don't fire it."

She was trying not to act frightened, but she didn't know what Joel would do. In one part of her mind that struck her awfully strange. Joel was her brother, she had grown up with him. She had worked and fought and quarreled with him, worried over him when he was sick, rejoiced when he got well. They had gone on long hunting trips together and had had secret talks away from their parents. She knew him in many ways yet suddenly she didn't know him.

She stepped between him and Ray, and she said quickly, under her breath, "Ray, you'd better go. And you'd better not come back until all this is settled."

"I'll be back, Francie," Ray said. "I have to come back."

He turned away, then, and walked off, disappearing in the darkness.

Joel stood where he was for a moment, then came toward her. "Get in the house," he said gruffly.

Francie stiffened. "I'll not go in the house until I'm ready."

He grabbed her arm as though to drag her there, but Francie pulled free nad faced him angrily. "Leave me alone, Joel. Quit trying to act like a man."

"Someone around here has to. Who was he?"

"Ray McGregor."

"I thought so. I saw the way he looked at you the other morning. Keep away from him, Francie. He's no good."

"What do you know about him?"

"He's one of the men who's trying to drive us off our land, isn't he? He's old McGregor's son. What more do I have to tell you?

"He doesn't agree with what his father's doing. He told me so, Joel."

"Sure. To make an impression. But he'll be right with the others when they come tearing in here to move us out. See if I'm not right."

Francie bit her lips. She was terribly afraid it would happen just as Joel had said. Ray might be sorry for them, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He was his father's son, and a cattleman, and couldn't be expected to turn against his own people.

"You better get in the house," Joel said again.

His male attitude was suddenly irritating but she didn't feel like fighting

with him. Nodding, she started toward the house.

More cattle were moved into the valley the next day, but the men who came with them held them in the lower part of the valley, away from the planted fields. One who was herding the cattle away was Ray McGregor. Francie could easily tell him from the others, and knowing how he felt gave her a slight hope that something might be worked out so they wouldn't have to move. She clung to it, tenaciously, awaiting the evening when she might see Ray again.

Ray didn't show up that evening, however. Maybe one of the reasons he didn't was that Joel was prowling the darkness, on guard against any possible trouble. Or it could have been he had nothing more to say to her. Francie didn't sleep well that night, and the next morning, just before noon, when she saw the men riding toward their house and realized that Ray wasn't with them, she gave up all hope.

It was a big, square shouldered man with a scowling, red face who seemed to be the leader of the group. He nodded bruskly to her father, and said, "Hello, Capehart. We met once in town, about a year ago. I'm Sheriff Henderson."

"I remember you, Henderson," Ben Capehart said nodding.

HE STOOD in front of the house he had built, his arm around Mary's waist. Joel was next to him. Francie stood next to Mary.

"Some things I have to do, I don't like to do," Henderson continued. "But the law's the law and I took an oath to enforce it. I've got warrants, here, for the arrest of you and your son for trespassing on land owned by Carl McGregor. We'll have to take you into town."

"I wasn't notified of the land sale," Ben Capehart said.

"Don't know anything about that," the sheriff answered. "If you've got any right to be here, you'll have to prove it in court. My job is to arrest you and your son and bring you in."

"What of my wife and daughter?"

"They can come with us, or wagon in behind us. I've got a big house in town. They can stay there while you're in jail. My wife will make them welcome."

"Can I arrange bail?" Ben asked.

"Maybe so, after you see the judge. But you can't move back here until after the matter is settled in court. I'd like to get started to town soon as we can."

Ben Capehart stared out at his fields and at the cattle in the lower valley beyond. His shoulders slumped. He seemed suddenly old and tired. He glanced at Joel whose body was tense and whose hand had dropped to his holstered gun. He shook his head and said, "Don't try anything foolish, Joel." Then he looked back at the sheriff and added, "Can I have a few minutes with my wife and daughter before we leave."

"Don't make it too long," the sheriff said.

They went inside, Ben, Mary, Joel and Francie, and at first no one said anything. Then Joel swore bitterly, slammed his fist on the table, and glared at his father. "I thought we were going to fight," he half shouted. "I didn't think we would give up like this."

Ben shook his head. "There never was the possibility that we would fight. I had hoped McGregor might be a reasonable, or an honest man. I still hope that he may be. We will go to jail, and to court, and we will present our case there. Maybe we can come back here someday. Maybe we will have to start over, somewhere else. This is a big country we live in."

"I still didn't think we'd give up without a fight," Joel said angrily. "Once we leave here they can destroy our fields, burn down our house. If we won in court we'd have nothing to return to."

"Can the two of us run off a sheriff's posse, and all of McGregor's men?" Ben asked. He shook his head wearily, then glanced at Mary and added, "Choose the things you want to save, the things most precious to you. Then you and Francie load them in a wagon and follow us to town."

"I'd rather go with you now," Mary said.

"No, there are some things which should be saved, which it would take us a long time to replace. I don't like to leave you with such a job, Mary, but I thought—I hoped against hope that things would work out differently. I didn't see that McGregor might use the law against use and have me arrested."

Mary walked up to him and put her arms around him. "Francie and I will manage," she promised.

There wasn't much more to be said. They went outside again. Ben and Joel surrendered their guns and saddled and mounted their horses, and rode down the valley with the posse.

Mary and Francie watched them from in front of the house—watched until they were out of sight. Mary cried a little but Francie was dry eyed and tense. She almost had cheered at what Joel had said.

She almost felt that Joel was more right than her father, and that they should have fought to hold their land, no matter what the odds against them.

"We'll never come back here," Mary said tragically. "I feel it in my bones, Francie. The court that will hear our case is McGregor's court, a cattleman's court. We've lost already."

"But we're still here, now," Francie said.

"And we must pack."

"Why?"

"We must choose the things we want to save."

"And if we want to save it all, what then? What if we want to save the house and the land. We can't load the house and the land in a wagon."

"We'll take smaller things," Mary said.

"But first, why don't we have a cup of coffee—and talk," Francie said.

"Yes, let's have coffee," Mary agreed.

They went inside, made coffee, and sat at the table drinking it. Mary looked around the room, smiling. "I liked it here, we were happy here. It'll be something to remember. How will we ever choose the things to take with us?"

"Maybe we should take everything," Francie said.

"We haven't a wagon big enough."

"Then maybe we should build a bigger wagon."

"That would take time."

"What's the hurry. No one said we had to leave."

Mary stared at her thoughtfully. "You've something in your mind. What is it, Francie?"

"Nothing special," Francie said. "I'm just not going to be in a hurry. I'm not going to hurry today, or tomorrow, or the next day. I may never get around to packing."

"But we can't stay here."

"Why not? Mr. McGregor thought that if he had our men arrested and taken to town, we would follow them. But do we have to follow them?"

Mary bit her lips. "I ought to be with Ben."

"Why? Ben will be all right. The jail has a roof. They'll have to feed him. And Joel—"

FRANCIE stopped speaking when she heard someone ride up outside. She went to the door, opened it, and saw Ray McGregor.

"I thought you might need a little help," Ray said.

"Help doing what?" Francie asked.

"Loading your wagon."

Francie shook her head. "We haven't got around to that yet. There are so many things we want to take we can't make up our minds where to start. How can we load our plowed fields on a wagon?"

"Your plowed fields?" Ray was frowning.

"Yes. And our house, Ray? How can we put our house on a wagon?"

"You can't."

"But it's our house. We built it. We don't want to leave it behind."

Ray looked puzzled. He shifted in the saddle, then dismounted, tied his horse, and came forward. Mary had joined Francie at the door and Francie said, "Mother, this is Ray McGregor, Mr. Mc-

Gregor's son."

"Hello, Ray," Mary said. "We were just having coffee. Would you like some."

"I came here to help you load your wagon," Ray said. "I thought you'd want to get started for town."

"There's no hurry," Mary said.

Ray now was scowling. He had pulled off his hat and was twisting the brim around in his hand. He said, "Father won't like it. He thought you'd be out of the valley beofre dark."

Francie was beginning to feel a little excited. She wanted to laugh but she knew this wasn't the time for it. She said, "Ray, tell your father we just can't make up our minds what to load in the wagon. In fact, it may take us days to reach a decision."

His eyes widened and Francie was sure he understood what was in her mind.

"Come on in," Mary said again. "I make good coffee."

But Ray shook his head. "I wouldn't feel right, drinking it. I don't like what I'm doing. You can't get by with it, you know. You can't stay here."

"We didn't say we were going to," Francie answered. "We just said we weren't yet ready to leave—and might not be for a long time."

"You don't know my father," Ray said darkly.

He turned, walked back to his horse, climbed into the saddle, and rode off.

"He seems like a nice young man," Mary said, looking closely at Francie.

Francie said nothing, but she still felt excited. And she was sure Ray would be back again, maybe after it grew dark . . .

Carl McGregor came before that. He came by mid-afternoon and he looked angry.

"You're still here," he said when they stepped out to face him. "You haven't started loading your wagon."

"That's right," Francie said.

"You want help?"

"No."

"When are you leaving?"

"We're not sure when we'll be ready, Mr. McGregor."

McGregor leaned forward in the saddle. "You're not fooling me, Miss," he declared. "You're not planning to leave. You think because you're a woman we'll go soft on you, but you're wrong. I'm going to send two men up here to load your wagon whether you like it or not You'll be on your way out of the valley in two hours."

"They would have to go in the house to get the things to load on the wagon, wouldn't they?"

"Of course they would."

"Then send two men you don't care about," Francie said, "for it's still our house, and anyone who enters uninvited, gets shot."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Send your men and find out."

McGregor's body jerked erect. "So you think you can bluff me do you, young lady? We'll find out about that."

He wheeled his horse away and went racing off down the valley.

Mary looked at Francie and Francie looked at Mary. Each saw the other a little pale, and tight lipped. And Francie knew that this wasn't a game any longer. It suddenly had taken a serious turn. McGregor would send his men. They would enter the house and start carrying things out to the wagon.

When that happened, they would have lost and their defiance of him would amount to nothing.

"What will we do?" Mary asked, looking worried.

"What we said we'd do," Francie answered.

"You mean shoot a man?"

"No. Shoot at a man."

"But not hurt him."

"Women aren't supposed to be able to shoot straight, but a bullet is a bullet, and most men wouldn't want to fire on women. We still have a lot on our side."

"I don't know why I'm letting you do this, Francie," Mary said.

"I do," Francie said. "You're thinking of Ben and of how hard he worked to build this house, and of what the land means to him. Let's go inside."

MORE than two men came back with McGregor. There were eight who rode up to the house. Francie went to the door and opened it. She was holding Joel's rifle in her right hand. She stared at the men outside. Ray was one of them. He had reined up next to his father, and when he saw her and the rifle in her hand he leaned toward his father and said something in a hurried whisper. McGregor shook his head, angrily.

"I've men here to help you load your wagon," he announced.

"We don't need help," Francie said.

"You're getting it anyhow," McGregor answered. "Pete, you and Eddie climb down, go inside, and start carrying out the stuff they want to load. Hollis, you and Bill hitch up the wagon and bring it closer to the door."

Four of the men dismounted. Two headed to the barn to get the team. Two started toward the house. They didn't look very happy about it. They stared anxiously at the rifle Francie was holding. Francie lifted it.

"Don't you dare come any closer!" she cried.

The two men who had started toward the house, stopped. They looked nervously at McGregor.

"She's bluffing," McGregor scoffed. "She won't dare use that rifle. Go ahead. Start lugging out the stuff to put in the wagon."

The men started forward again and Francie knew suddenly that she couldn't stand there in the doorway and fire at them. She stepped back into the house, slammed the door, and moved away from it. She held the rifle trained on the door.

For several terribly long minutes, nothing happened. Francie was beginning to hope nothing ever would happen when she heard the men at the door, and saw the door start to open. She aimed the rifle at the top edge of it, and fired, and the door slammed shut.

Mary was at the curtained window, looking into the yard. "They're backing away," she called. "One is running. The others have drawn their guns."

Francie hurried to the window. Her legs felt shaky. Through it she could see McGregor and those who had come here with him. He heard McGregor swearing at the men and telling them to try the door again. The window was open several inches. She knelt down, pushed the rifle barrel through the opening, and fired a shot into the ground, inches in front of McGregor's horse. It roared into the air. McGregor fought it down.

"So you want to stay here do you?" he yelled. "All right, we'll see how long you stay."

He waved his arm in a circling movement, said something to his men, and rode away with them.

Francie sat down on the floor and looked at Mary. She felt completely drained of strength.

"What do you think they'll do?" Mary asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. What can they do, long as we sit here?"

"They can break in at night when we're asleep."

"We won't sleep. I'll stay awake half the night, then wake you up. We'll nail down the windows and lock the doors."

"And tomorrow?"

"We'll wait out tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. The water barrel is full. We have all the food we'll need."

"If Ben knew what we were doing, he would be crazy with worry."

"Ben doesn't know."

THE afternoon wore on. Down the valley, McGregor's men had spread out and had started driving cattle up the stream.

"They'll turn them into our fields," Francie said. "Our crops will be ruined, but we can plant again."

Mary looked at her thoughtfully, and after a moment said, "Francie, what's come over you? Why does it mean so much to you to stay here? When we came to this valley you were lonesome for someone to play with. You look forward for months to the trips we take to town

when you can see other people. I should think you would be glad to leave this lonesome place and to move to where you might meet some nice young man."

"I'll meet a nice young man someday," Francie said smiling.

"Not here."

"Who knows?" Francie said. "It might happen here."

She stood at the window watching the men herding cattle this way. She wondered which rider was Ray McGregor, but they were too far away to distinguish.

The afternoon wore on. It grew dark. They had supper, then sat in the darkness, waiting. They had made fast the windows and doors, but through the windows and walls of the house they could hear a distant shouting and could sense that the cattle which had been herded this way were being driven across their fields.

A sudden knock on the door startled them. It came again. Francie reached for her rifle and walked up to the door. She called, "Who is it?"

"It's Ray. May I come in?"

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

Francie unlocked and opened the door. She felt strangely excited, and rather pleased, and she was glad of the darkness which hid from her mother the expression on her face.

Ray came in. He closed the door and stood against it. He said, "I can't see you, Francie. It's so dark in here I can't see anything."

"If you walk straight ahead three steps, you'll come to a table," Francie said. "There's a chair at the table where you can sit down."

He moved straight ahead. He found the table, and a chair, and sat down.

Francie locked the door again, then stood against it. She said, "Mary, you met Ray this afternoon. He came here to help us pack."

Mary was standing near the side window. She must have been surprised, but her voice didn't show it. She said, "Hello, Ray."

He said, "Hello, Mrs. Capehart."

Francie leaned her rifle against the wall. She walked to the table and took a chair across from Ray.

"I hope your house is well built, strong," Ray said.

"It's very well built," Francie said.

"Father's men are herding the cattle this way," Ray explained. "He's going to jam them around the house so tightly you won't be able to get outside. Their weight could push the house over if it wasn't strong."

"The house will stand," Francie said.

"You are supposed to get frightened when you see cattle all around the place," Ray continued. "By morning you're supposed to be ready to get out of here without anything if only you can escape. I told him a cattle jam wouldn't frighten you, but he thinks it will."

Francie smiled. "It may frighten us, but we won't leave."

"You've got him worried," Ray said.

"How?"

"He knows how to fight men, but he doesn't know how to fight women. He's not afraid of any man living, but mother can control him with her little finger."

"I wish your mother was here now, and on our side," Francie said.

"You two are proving enough for him without her," Ray said.

"The yard's getting full of cattle," Mary said from the window. "Unless you leave pretty soon, Ray, you won't be able to get away."

"Then I'd have to stay, wouldn't I?" Ray said. "Would you mind, Mrs. Capehart?"

"What will your father think?"

"He will be furious. It may make him harder than ever to deal with. I've got to be honest with you, Mrs. Capehart. My father doesn't think much of me. He thinks I'm weak, and soft, and that I'll never amount to much. Half the time I agree with him. I've never had the courage to stand up to him when it was important."

"Will you have the courage to stand up to him when he finds you are here?"

"I don't know."

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MARY came up to the table. She said, "Ray, I think I like you. I think you're stronger than you believe you are. I offered you coffee this afternoon, will you have it now?"

"I believe I will, Mrs. Capehart," Ray said.

She walked to the stove. She said, "You can call me Mary. Everyone does."

Francie felt like reaching across the table and touching Ray's arm, but she didn't. Instead, she said, "We were going to take turns standing guard tonight. Would you like to take one turn, Ray?"

"I'll take all three," Ray said. "You and your mother can sleep."

"No. That wouldn't be fair."

"I won't be able to sleep, anyhow. I'm wide awake."

"So am I," Francie said. "And a little excited. Are you?"

"More than you know," Ray said. "I'm finally doing something on my own. I'm thinking for myself."

"You're not sorry you're here?"

"I'm proud that I'm here. Of course, it's easy to say that now. How well I'll say it in the morning when I have to face my father, I don't know."

"You'll do very well," Mary said from the stove, where she was warming the coffee. "I feel sure of it."

She lit a lamp in a wall bracket on the far side of the room, but turned the wick quite low. She then brought three cups to the table, and after this, poured their coffee. The dim light was enough to let Francie see Ray's face. She liked what she saw.

Mary put out the lamp after they had had their coffee and they sat at the table, talking. Cattle were all around the house, now, and the mooing sounds they made reached in through the windows and walls, and now and then the house shuddered as some animal would lunge against it. They made several trips to the windows.

"Father's men will keep them jammed against the house," Ray said. "I think your barn went down a minute ago."

"We can build a new barn," Francie said.

She stood close beside him, feeling the touch of his body on her arm and shoulder. She was smiling. And it struck her suddenly that she wasn't at all afraid of what was going to happen tomorrow.

Quite late, she went to bed. She didn't think she would sleep a wink, but she did.

It was still dark when she awoke, and at first she had the strange notion she was lost somewhere for there was a trampling, lowing sound in the air and now and then the wall of the room would rock. In a rush, then, she remembered all that had happened and she got up quickly and hurried to the window. The gray promise of the morning was in the sky, thinning the shadows sufficiently so she could see the mass of cattle packed up against the house. Where a shed had been she could see nothing. To her left was the sagging roof of the barn.

She dressed quickly and went into the front room. Ray and her mother were at the table, talking, and the good smell of coffee and fried bacon was in the air.

"You didn't wait breakfast for me," she cried accusingly.

Both looked at her and laughed, and Ray stood up and said, "Take your place at the table. I'll get your coffee and fry your mush."

"I can get my own breakfast," she said.

But she didn't. Instead she walked to the table and sat down, and then sampled the coffee Ray brought her and waited while he fixed her breakfast.

"Didn't you sleep at all?" she asked Mary.

"Yes, I slept," Mary said. "It's Ray who stayed up all night, but he insisted on it."

When he brought her plate she saw the dark shadow of the beard on his jaw and throat and she thought his eyes looked tired.

"We should have taken turns," she said frowning. "No one came to the door?"

"No one but a few hundred cows," Ray said. "Or maybe they were the same cows. I didn't ask them." Then he grinned and added, "I won't always get your breakfast like this. Just on special occasions."

Mary laughed, and Francie could feel

her cheeks getting hot. She thought, sometimes things happen too suddenly. Sometimes you just open your eyes and find yourself looking at what you've been hunting for, and don't have the pleasure of finding it slowly.

RAY laid down after breakfast, but only after they both had promised to call him the minute they heard from his father. The sky grew brighter. The sun came up and the day began to warm. At first they could see none of the McGregor's riders beyond the cattle milling around the house, but toward mid-morning they came in sight and when they began cutting their way through the cattle toward the house, Mary said it was time to wake Ray McGregor.

"He's a fine young man," she said to Francie. "I think he likes you."

"This isn't the time to talk about that," Francie said quickly.

"Why not?" Mary asked. "Ben and I were caught in a flood when he asked me to marry him. Neither of us knew for sure that we'd get out alive."

Francie went into the bedroom. Ray seemed sound asleep but his eyes opened the instant she touched his shoulder, and he sat up, smiling, and said, "Hello Francie."

She said, "Hello Ray."

He reached for her hands and stood up, holding them, and there was a look in his eyes that made Francie's heart start beating wildly. He pulled her forward until her body was touching his, and he said, "Francie, I've got something to tell you. That is—"

Mary's voice reached them from the front room. "They're almost here."

"What is it, Ray?" Francie asked.

"Maybe I ought to wait until after, until we see what happens," Ray said.

"No," Francie said quickly.

But a stubborn, scowling look had settled on his face and he lifted his hands to her shoulders and pushed her away. "I've got to prove something first. And besides that, I don't like to be hurried."

"Francie!" Mary called. "Ray!"

"Come on," Ray said.

He took her arm and they started toward the door, Francie lagging back so he almost had to pull her with him. She thought, I should have wakened him sooner, but it'll be all right. It'll work out. It's got to.

Mary was at the curtained, front window. They joined her there and looked into the yard. McGregor and four of his men had cut their way into the cattle massed around the house, and had pushed forward until they were just outside. One of his men was leading two extra saddled horses. As Francie and Ray got to the window, they heard McGregor's voice.

"Mrs. Capehart?" he called. "Mrs. Capehart, I want to talk to you."

Mary and Francie both looked at Ray. It seemed to Francie that he was a little pale. He moistened his lips and said, "See what he wants."

Mary nooded. She walked to the door and opened it and looked outside. She asked, "What is it, Mr. McGregor?"

"Sorry my cattle have overrun your place, but it was bound to happen," McGregor said.

"It was made to happen," Mary corrected.

McGregor shrugged. "Anyhow, we've brought you some horses so you can get away."

"But we don't want to get away," Mary said.

"Look here," McGregor said. "Right now, your house is standing, but it won't stand long. Every time a cow lunges against it, it weakens. You'd be smart to get out while you can."

Mary smiled. She said, "That's very kind of you, Mr. McGregor, but your cattle don't bother me at all. I don't believe they can push the house down. My husband built it, and whatever he builds, he builds well."

McGregor leaned toward her, his face showing its familiar, dark flush of anger. He made a sweeping motion with his arm, and shouted, "That does it. I'm not going to fool with you two women any longer. For your own safety I'm going to have you

carried away from here."

Ray took a deep breath. He reached for Francie's hand and squeezed it. "Time for me to do something," he whispered. And then he stepped to the door and stood there at Mary's side.

McGregor's eyes widened when he saw him, and he reared back in the saddle as though someone had struck him. "You!" he gasped. "So this is where you disappeared to. I thought you had turned yellow and gone home to your mother."

"No. This is where I came," Ray said. "I told you I didn't think you were being fair. If you hadn't prevented it, Mr. Capehart would have heard of the land sale and could have bought the land he's farming."

"I had nothing to do with the fact that he wasn't notified," McGregor shouted.

"I think you did," Ray said. "And I think I can prove it."

"Get out here!" McGregor screamed. "Joe, give him one of those extra horses you're leading."

Ray didn't move. He shook his head.

McGregor whipped up his gun. "I said, get out here!"

"You won't use your gun, father," Ray said. "For once, at least, it's no use to you."

McGREGOR looked at his gun, then slowly reholstered it. He was silent for a moment, but not long. "I'll give you one more chance, Ray," he said heavily. "Get out here. Climb one of the horses Joe's leading."

"And if I don't, what?" Ray asked.

"If you don't, I'll drag you out and throw you on the horse myself."

"I don't think you can," Ray said.

McGregor swung to the ground. He marched up to the door, reached out and grabbed Ray by the front of the shirt, and jerked him into the yard. "Get on one of those horses," he shouted.

Ray twisted free. "I'm staying here, father."

"I say you're not," McGregor shouted.

His fist whipped out at Ray's head and although Ray tried to duck, he wasn't quick enough. The blow sent him reeling backwards. He tripped and went down, and sitting in the dust of the yard he wiped his hand across his face. His nose was bleeding.

McGregor stepped forward and stood over him. "Get up!" he roared. "Climb your horse."

Ray got up, but he shook his head. "Put me on it if you think you can."

"Then I will," McGregor answered.

His fist stabbed out again at Ray's face, but this time Ray ducked, and he hit back, once, twice, three times. It was McGregor who staggered away, this time, and whose knees went rubbery and wouldn't hold him up.

He fell, but jerked almost instantly to his feet, and rushed forward. There was a flurry of fighting, then Ray went down again.

"That'll teach you a lesson," McGregor screamed. "That'll teach you—"

Francie hadn't expected Ray to get up again, but he did. He was slammed down again, but again he got up. Francie had moved to the doorway and was at Mary's side. It seemed to her she could feel every blow Ray took. His face was all bloody. She could hear the sound of his rasping breath. She whispered to Mary, "Stop it! Stop it!"

"We can't stop it," Mary said.

"But they're killing each other."

"Men don't kill each other with their fists," Mary said. "This is a hurt Ray has needed, but it doesn't feel like a hurt."

He went down again, lying on his back, and this time he was slow getting up and he wobbled from side to side when he faced his father.

"Get on one of those horses," McGregor screamed at him.

"No," Ray mumbled. "I'm staying here."

McGregor swore. He rushed in, aiming a blow at Ray's head. Francie winced at the sound of it. McGregor slammed another blow at him, and as he staggered, hit him again. And this time when Ray went down he made no effort to get up.

McGregor stood above him, rocking back and forth on his heels and toes. McGregor's face was bloody and he seemed

to have a hard time breathing. He waited for a while, then made his way unsteadily to where one of his men was holding his horse. He drew a bottle from one of the saddle bags and took a deep drink.

Francie wanted to rush to Ray's side, kneel down beside him, take his head in her lap and wipe the blood from his face, but Mary held her wrist, and whispered, "No Francie. Stay here."

"Sam, you and Andy go get the women," McGregor ordered. "Bring 'em out here and load 'em on the horses we brought along."

Two men started to dismount. Francie stepped away from the door. She came back almost immediately with Joel's rifle. She leveled it at the two men who were walking toward the house. "Don't come any closer," she shouted. "We're staying here."

The men stopeed where they were. They looked back at McGregor who moved forward to join them.

"When are you going to start being sensible?" McGregor asked. "You can't stay here, and you know it."

"We think we can," Francie said.

Ray stirred. He sat up, then got unsteadily to his feet. "They mean it, father," he said quietly. "Jamming cattle around them won't scare them away. Guns won't scare them away. They're going to stay here."

"Go climb your horse," McGregor snapped.

Ray shook his head. "No. I'm going to stay here, too."

McGregor wrenched around to face him. "Am I going to have to whip you again?"

"I'm afraid so," Ray said. "But even that won't change my mind. I'm staying here."

McGregor wiped a hand over his face. A bewildered look was in his eyes. He took a step toward Ray, then stopped. "I don't get it," he mumbled. "What the hell's come over you? What do you want?"

"I want to see this land fenced off," Ray said. "I want you to sell it to Capehart, and let him stay here and farm it."

"Never!" McGregor shouted.

"Then we might as well start fighting again."

CARL McGREGOR glanced at Francie, and after that looked back at Ray. He said, "It's that girl, isn't it? She's the one who's turned your head."

"She's partly responsible," Ray admitted.

"At least, she's got spunk," McGregor admitted "I like that about her."

"Then admit a few more things," Ray said. "If this land is fenced off, there's no reason why it will interfere with the cattle we'll be running here in the valley."

"I never saw it before," McGregor said, "but you're as stubborn as your mother. When I chase the two women out of here, what are you going to do?"

"You haven't chased them out yet," Ray said. " I don't think you can."

"But if I do?"

"Then I'll farm their land, and neither you nor all the men you've got can stop me."

"You're a cattleman, not a farmer."

"Then I'll learn to be a farmer."

McGregor made an angry motion with his arm. "You won't like it, but if you think you will, try it." He glared at the two women in the doorway, then turned and stalked to his horse, pulled himself into the saddle, and wheeled and rode away. The others followed him.

Ray walked back to the house. His face was puffed, and swollen and blood streaked, but it seemed to Francie that he was smiling. He said, "Francie, we've won. He'll come around slowly, but in the end, he'll give in."

"I wish I was as sure of that as you are."

"I know him," Ray said. "He won't be pleasant about it for a long time, but he'll let us stay here. Maybe he'll do it by putting me in charge of the cattle he means to graze here in the valley, and telling me that if I want to put up with a family of farmers, I can."

"Could you put up with such a family?" Mary asked.

Ray laughed, and nodded. "I think I

(Continued on page 90)

The Sacatone Outlaw

By W. J. REYNOLDS

The trouble began when Andy saw the girl and got an ache in his wishbone

DESTINY caught up with Andy Rakestraw on a Saturday night. Andy had worked hard all winter keeping his two hundred lean cows alive, then he'd spent a hard spring during calving time and also helped with the spring roundup on the XL, his old outfit. Andy needed rest and relaxation. and so rode into Tanktown.

It was Andy's misfortune to run smack into the XL crew. They liked Andy and he liked them and one thing led to another, and shortly, Andy and the other XL men, were pretty well liquored up.

Somebody mentioned food and they immediately decided to go to the Tanktown Eatery. This was a mistake on Andy's part.

Andy focussed gray eyes, slightly bleary, on wide, blue, disapproving eyes and shiny dark curls. Andy developed an ache in his wishbone, and later did not remember what he had eaten.

He was too jarred to notice the black looks of his arch enemy, Matlock, or Matlock's cowboy, Devore. Andy accompanied the XL back to the saloon, and kept mumbling something about "pretty as a

speckled pup under a red wagon." About a quart later, it dawned on George Allen and others of the XL what Andy kept mumbling about. A few questions brought forth from the uncautious Andy that he had been considerable chawed by the love bug.

The word passed swiftly and the XL became overly solicitous and full of solemn advise. This would have made Andy suspicious if he hadn't been nearly drunk. Instead, he listened and just as solemnly agreed that a man in his responsible position as a rancher should have a wife to lend dignity to his spread. He needed a wife with shiny black curls and wide blue eyes, one just about the size of that new waitress in the Eatery.

"Matlock was sure shining up to her," George said.

Andy jerked upright. "What's that? That Matlock skunk?"

"Sure," George said. "Yessir, he was sure making headway with that little helpless gal."

"That skunk," Andy repeated, glaring. "I'll clobber him!" He lurched upright and swung by way of demonstrating, and fell flat on his face. He was helped to his chair again. "Who tripped me?" he asked glaring again.

"Matlock—" George started to say.

Andy roared, "Where is he? I'll teach him to trip me! I'll—"

"Women," Gimpy Yates said loudly, "don't like fighting."

Andy dropped his cocked fist. "Huh?"

Yates winked owlishly at George. "Andy, a man like you needs a wife. Man you don't get many chances to wed a real purty gal. Just how many times have you seen a purty gal like that one? Never before, eh? A single one."

"You sit there," George said, "growling and while you're here, Matlock is in that eating place asparking that gal, cutting you out! Just think of that little gal out there in his hogpen! Why he'd work her to death in a year, she'd be a slattern and likely he'd have most of her pretty teeth knocked out. A hag! And, what's wrong with you? Ain't you got no manhood?"

"You aim to let Matlock have that little gal, Andy, and ruin her life?"

"Why," Gimpy said, "if I had Andy's way with the women folks, I'd get down there and ask her flat out to marry me and take her right out of that doggone eatery! And away from that hog Matlock!"

Andy's head was swiveling solemnly, from one to the other, and there was a growing indignation and determination in his face. He slammed the table with his fist. "I'll do it!" Andy bellowed. "It's nothing but right!"

"It'd be the same," George said with a choking sound, "as rescuing her from a terrible fate!"

"Why, George," Gimpy asked, "did you see the way them pretty blue eyes just melted like buttter on a stove lid when Andy looked at her?"

"I sure did, George" said.

"I'll do it," Andy repeated. "Like George says, it's like rescuing a lady in dis—dis—"

"Tress," George said.

"Tress!" Andy yelled.

"All right, you cow chasers," a hard voice cut in. "The XL head for home!" It was Joe Tucker, the tough XL ramrod.

There were shouts of protests, but Tucker was unmoved, and eventually, mumbling and grumbling, the XL filed out for their mounts. Andy lurched to his feet. "Joe, durn it—"

"Can you get home all right, Andy?" Joe asked.

"What?" Andy shouted. "Sure I can get home!"

Tucker grinned, put his beefy hand on Andy's head and pressed. Andy collapsed into his chair.

Andy started to get up, thought of those shiny curls again, and grinned foolishly at the table. Finally, he lurched to his feet, and weaved for the door. By heck, a fellow didn't need a bunch of cowboys to help him get wedded up to a mighty pretty gal.

Andy missed the door of the eatery the first time but made it on the second run. Only Matlock and Devore were there.

"We're closing," the girl said.

ANDY squinted at the girl, wondering if she were twins. "I'm Andy Rakestraw," he announced, feeling she had a right to know something of her future husband, "I got me a ranch up near the Sacatones. I'm asking you to marry me."

"Get back to the saloon with the other loudmouths," Matlock said. His little eyes glared hate at Andy.

Andy focussed his eyes on Matlock. "Look here, you hub headed scrub!" Andy said loudly. "You want me to stomp you to death?" Andy's temper heated. He shouted, "The last time I just broke your arm when you palmed an ace on me. This time I'll make it your head!"

Devore, a cowboy in dirty levis, got off his stool. "I'll pound his head off, boss."

Andy lurched off his stool. "Come on!" he bellowed. "I'll whip both of you with one hand in my pocket!" He shoved a hand in his pocket, lost his balance and fell on his face again.

Matlock and Devore landed on top of him. Matlock nudged Devore. "We'll take him outside so Miss Marion can close up."

"What will you do with him?" she asked.

"Why, nothing," Matlock said. "Andy is sort of violent at times. We'll just sit on him till he passes out then he'll sleep it off. You just don't worry about him!"

They dragged him out and to the back alley. Andy was struggling but he was no match for the two of them. Once in the alley with the town mostly bedded down, Matlock snarled, "Now hold him up, Devore, I aim to beat the hell out of him!"

"You can't even do it, and him hanging onto me!" Andy shouted.

But Matlock did. He beat Andy until he was unconscious. Andy came to with his throat on fire, and choking. The shock was enough to clear his head somewhat, and he found Matlock and Devore forcing whiskey down him. Andy struggled, but Devore sat on him, and Matlock slammed a fist against his jaw. They poured an entire pint down him, holding his nose when he refused to swallow until he had to swallow.

Andy passed out.

The sun shining in his face woke Andy. It took Andy some time to get his eyes open, they were swollen nearly shut and his face was puffed and crusted with dried blood. He was lying in a patch of weeds behind Hardeman's store.

Andy found other sore spots, he was one big sore spot, but he made it to his feet and finally the horse trough. After a thorough drenching, he set his course to the livery and with the help of the grinning hostler, got his Nig horse saddled, and mounted. He rode out of town with his eyes shut, trying not to think of the fifteen miles ahead to his little ranch.

He swayed and dozed, letting his horse set his own speed, while he gave himself over to his aches and pains. He wondered occasionally if he should open his eyes and calculate the distance remaining or just wait and be surprised.

He decided to wait, laying a small bet which would come first, the ranch or the explosion of his head. His mouth felt like it was stuffed with dirty cotton. He tried to spit, but the effort wasn't a success. The movement of his jaw brought on a shooting pain. Andy lifted a hand to explore the lump there.

"Must have been fighting a horse," Andy muttered. He frowned, trying to scrape together some clue. Matlock and Devore had figured in it someplace.

Memory stirred, became vague pictures. His memory improved with the effort then Andy muttered darkly. Matlock had beat him, by grab! Hammered the stuffing out of Andy Rakestraw while that dirty shirt of a cowboy, Devore held him!

His Nig horse neighed and tossed his head. Andy reluctantly opened his eyes and blinked until the glaring sunlight didn't completely blind him. He was crossing the Upjump Meadows with Upjump Creek just ahead. Andy's eyes squinted at the bridge.

A wagon stood on the bridge, one rear corner, sagging, and then Andy made out the wheel, spokes shattered and the wreckage hanging partly through broken

planks. A woman left the shade of a nearby cottonwood and came to stand by the wagon. Another figure lay on a mattress in the shade. A pair of bony horses stood grazing, collars slid down around their ears.

"Nesters," Andy muttered. "Sitting on their behinds waiting for somebody to come get them out of a hole." Andy groaned.

He pulled up near the wagon, scowling at it then gave the woman a sour glance. Andy blinked, stared, then tried to grin, not even noticing the twinges of pain. It was the girl from the eatery, but instead of a trim white dress, she was in faded calico. But, Andy noticed, the calico had gained thereby. The shiny curls jiggled with her head movement, and the eyes were very blue, and maybe just a trifle too dark as she recognized him.

"Howdy!" Andy said heartily, and his head nearly flew off.

"The bridge planks broke," she said, her voice the music of bubbling mountain brooks, "the spokes are shattered. The wheel will have to be rebuilt, I think." She bit a red lip. "Mother and I couldn't get it off the bridge. Mother hurt her back."

"Where're your menfolk?"

"In Arkansas. Dead."

Andy forgot his throbbing head. "You and your mother alone? Where you going through here?"

"Springer Wells. Mr. Matlock said by going through the Sacatone Pass we could save fifty miles."

Andy snorted. "Matlock! It'd save that much mileage all right. But you'd have to be a goat. It's tough going there on horseback. Ain't been a wagon through there in ten years! All rocks and gullies now! Didn't you check with anybody else about the pass?"

She drew herself up. "We accepted Mr. Matlock's word. Why should he lie to me?" Her tone indicated that she had no such confidence in Andy Rakestraw.

ANDY RAKESTRAW, with some returning wisdom, remained silent except for necessary instructions or commands. He dragged the wagon off the bridge, using the team and his Nig horse. Six of the old rotten spokes were broken, and the wheel useless. Andy cut a sapling, rigged it to drage under the wagon to form a sliding support. Then he loaded the elder woman. "That'll make it to my place, about two more miles. There's an old wheel behind the barn that might do. You'll be welcome to it."

"We're in your debt, Mr. Rakestraw," the elder woman said.

"Glad to help, ma'am," Andy said, and pulled his Nig horse behind the wagon.

As the outfit limped on toward his ranch, Andy rode scowling behind. Now why would Matlock send two lone women through Sacatone Pass? It didn't make sense, even considering Matlock's meanness. Why, by grab, they might have broke down and starved if they weren't rescued.

Andy's mouth dropped open. Had that double damned Matlock done this knowing their outfit would break down before it negotiated a hundred feet of the pass? Then he'd remember the pass hadn't been cleaned out in the ten years since the stage line had quit it, and come riding to the rescue, and take the grateful womenfolks to his hogpen of a ranch!

"I ought to shoot him!" Andy snarled. "Maybe I will!"

When they pulled up at Andy's neat little two room cabin, he dismounted and came around the wagon. "I'll just take your ma inside on the bed."

"Thank you, Mr. Rakestraw," the girl said. "But that will not be necessary. She's used to sleeping in the wagon."

Andy resorted to craft. He frowned disapprovingly at the girl. "I have a real bed in there, with springs. Your ma will rest a lot better on it."

"I—I—well, thank you, Mr. Rakestraw."

"You're welcome, ma'am."

"You're very kind to us, Mr. Rakestraw," the elder woman said smiling. "Our name is Cox, my daughter's name is Marion."

"Real pleased, ma'am," Andy said grinning, and carried Mrs. Cox's slight figure easily into the cabin and deposited her on the bed while Marion hovered anxiously near him.

But once inside the neat cabin, she seemed to relax a little, and regarded the bare but clean rooms with surprise.

"There's meat in the leanto," Andy said. "Other stuff in the cupboards there if you'd like to make your ma some soup or something. I'll tend the stock."

When Andy returned from feeding the team, his own Nig horse, and attending to his hospital cows and calves, he found steaks smoking on the table, and Marion removing a pan of brown biscuits from the oven. He grinned cheerfully.

"Mother is asleep," she told him. "I fed her some soup. She can eat when she wakes." Andy thought he detected just a hint of relenting in her steady eyes.

"I'll get that wagon fixed tomorrow," Andy said, and despite the big lie, it didn't show on his battered face. "At least," he added under his breath, "tomorrow week."

They ate in silence while Andy kept stealing glances at her until her face began to crimson. He said, "Why were you working in the cafe?"

"Money. There was nothing left after Father was buried and his bills paid. We have to live Mr. Rakestraw." She regarded him with disconcerting steadiness. "What happened after you left the cafe?"

"Devore," Andy said, "held me while Mr. Matlock beat me to a pulp. Then they poured a pint of whiskey down me, holding my nose." Andy's face started getting red just remembering it.

Her eyes immediately lost their growing friendliness. "That sounds rather far fetched, Mr. Rakestraw."

"You don't know Matlock," Andy said. "But when you get to the pass you will start knowing him."

There was a slight frown on her brow. "Why would they pour whiskey down you? You were—you didn't need more!"

"I've been thinking about it," Andy said. "It's beginning to figure."

"Yes?"

"He knew you were leaving this morning early?" When she nodded, he went on, "The pass hasn't been cleaned since the stage line quit. You can't get through in a wagon. You'd have wrecked that wagon in less than a hundred feet. But I was likely to be passed out from the beating and whiskey till sometime this morning, plenty of time for you to pass this place, and the wagon tracks could have been going to his place. His or somebody elses. Nobody would have known you were up there but him."

"But why?"

You're a mighty pretty girl, Marion," Andy said. "Maybe he thought you'd be grateful enough and scared-worried enough to marry him."

Her face reddened again, but she was worried too and nearly convinced. "It's hard to believe," she said.

"You can find out by going on up there," Andy said. "But I doubt you'll get the chance. He'll come busting in here about tomorrow when he comes back to see why you haven't shown up."

Her eyes widened. "Wh—what will you do?"

Andy grinned. "I'll give it some more thought."

"You won't—shoot him?"

"Like that Sacatone outlaw, Rakestraw, that he likely told you about?"

"Why—why, how did you know?"

Andy chuckled. "I've known Matlock a long time. He steals calves from me regular, or did up till last year."

"What happened?"

"Why," Andy said, "I went over there, me and George Allen and Joe Tucker, and had a talk with old Matlock. He refunded our losses and promised to not do it again.

"I thought cattle thieves were hanged out here?"

"Well," Andy said, "we didn't exactly catch him red handed, just strong suspicioned him. But we ain't lost none since!"

Andy took his blankets out to the wagon and despite his sore face he went to sleep grinning.

EARLY next morning, Andy examined the wheel behind the barn. He found it in disgustingly good shape, but there were four spokes weaker than the others. Deciding, that love and war demanded spirit and resourcefulness, Andy took a handy rock and smashed the four weaker spokes.

Cheered by his own brightness, Andy removed a seasoned oak two by four from the stable partition, and sawed off a spoke length and started chipping a rough outline with a hatchet. Later he'd use a draw knife. At this rate it was liable to be three-four days before the wagon was in shape to move, he thought happily.

Marion came out to the barn, looking fresh and pretty enough to bite, and she returned Andy's cheerful greeting, and announced, "Breakfast is ready." She eyed the wheel with some innocence. "Couldn't you make one good wheel from both of them?"

"Not safe," Andy said. "This will be a good one with these new spokes."

"You're very kind to us, Mr. Rakestraw."

"It's a real pleasure," Andy said.

As they sat down to the table, Mrs. Cox came in, walking carefully, and just as carefully took her chair while Andy held it for her. She smiled at him. "You know, Andy, I don't believe a word of that about you being an outlaw like we heard about you in town! You're just a kind hearted boy!"

Andy's ears reddened a little at this praise, but his pleasure was quickly spiked as she continued, "You couldn't be that wild ruffian in the eatery that Marion was telling me about. He must have beeen a terribly wild man!"

Andy's ears really flamed at that, but he noticed that Marion was struggling to conceal a smile and her eyes were laughing at him. By grab, at least she hadn't told her mother who he was!

A wagon clucked up outside and stopped. Andy went to the door, and saw Matlock in a buckboard, a wagon wheel canted in the small bed. Matlock had a nasty grin on his heavy face, but his little eyes were alert and angry.

Andy stepped outside and heard Marion behind him. "Matlock," Andy said ominously, "you turn that rig around and git! You sneaking skunk!"

Matlock ignored him. "Miss Marion," he said, "I've brought you folks a spare wheel. Good thing my man Devore was crossing the creek and saw the wrecked one and guessed what had happened. No telling what would have happened to you innocent womenfolk here with this outlaw!"

"Why you dirty—" Andy started toward Matlock.

"Stand hitched, Rakestraw!" Devore said from the corner of the house.

Andy whipped a glance back to see the dirty shirted cowboy, with a gun slanted in his hand. Andy stopped.

Matlock was grinning. He jumped out of the wagon and unloaded the wheel. "You folks get ready and we'll see you safe started. So that this outlaw won't bother you none!"

Andy looked at Marion. Her face was pale, and her eyes were uncertain. "But Mr. Rakestraw said the pass was impassable."

"More lies," Matlock growled. "He was holding you here. He broke the extra wheel there, didn't he? Wait!" He hurried to the barn and came back with two of the best spokes that Andy had broken. He triumphantly held up the broken ends to show the solid core. "Now are you convinced?" he demanded.

Marion Cox looked at Andy, her eyes darkening with more hurt than anger. "Very well, Mr. Matlock, we'll go," she said.

"Now wait," Andy said, "I—"

Devore stepped forward and swung his pistol. Andy was looking at Matlock, and the world suddenly exploded.

When Andy woke, he was alone, and from the position of the sun, he'd been out over an hour. He staggered into the house, soaked his head and cleaned the swollen gash behind his ear. He salved and bandaged it. His head hurt but his anger hurt worse. He buckled on his six-

shooter belt, checked the action of his .44 and went after his big Nig horse.

A few minutes later he was riding for Sacatone Pass, but wide of the road. Matlock had lost all his marbles, Andy thought, and the hulking two-bit rancher would know that Andy Rakestraw wasn't going to stand still for the kind of treatment he'd received the last two days.

Andy's rage cooled a little with the sobering thought. It meant that Matlock would expect him to come busting after them with blood in his eye and then Andy Rakestraw would be shot, and on Matlock's range. Matlock could get away with it as self-defense.

Maybe Matlock was in for a surprise, Andy thought grimly.

Three hours later, Andy Rakestraw silently gained the last few feet that allowed him a look down on a small ledge that commanded the entrance to Sacatone Pass. Devore squatted ten feet away, rifle lying across a boulder, his attention directed back toward Andy's ranch instead of at the wagon toiling into the pass.

Andy drew his .44 and cocked it. Devore jumped then froze. "Were you looking for me, you bushwhacking coyote?" Andy asked.

"Go to hell!" Devore snarled.

"Drop your gunbelt or start shooting," Andy said. Devore dropped it, and Andy made short work of binding him securely. "I reckon that will keep you till I get back. If I get back. Don't you hope I do, Devore?"

There was terror in Devore's eyes. He'd lay there and be eaten by the buzzards if anything happened to Andy.

"Don't leave me, Rakestraw!" he shouted. "I'll starve to death!"

"I'll be back," Andy said. "Maybe. You were fixing to bushwhack me."

"No! Honest to God, Rakestraw! I was going to miss you! Matlock told me to kill you, but I wasn't, honest I wasn't!"

"I reckon you're lying," Andy said, "but I'll drag you down to the pass anyhow."

ANDY was cautious as he rode after the wagon, and when he was fifty yards behind, still concealed by the brush and boulders, he left his Nig horse and went forward on foot.

He saw at once that the wagon was in trouble. From his concealment behind a scrub bush, he saw that the wagon had straddled a boulder too large to clear, but the team, lunging in the harness, sent the wagon forward, the boulder rolled, sending the wagon sideways to crash against a solid rock slab. A wheel splintered, the tongue broke and the frightened horses lunged again, twisting the double tree against the stub of a tongue, and then it came free. The lines were wrenched from Marion's hands, and the team galloped away to hangup on a scrub bush when they went on opposite sides of it.

Marion had been jerked nearly out of the wagon, and she hung to the dashboard then dropped to the ground. Matlock had ridden back and now he swung off his horse, his satisfaction was poorly concealed.

"Doggone," he said, "this is sure bad luck. Another fifty yards and it would a been a good road!"

Anger flashed in Marion's eyes, and some fright. "Mr. Matlock, I have eyes," she said angrily. "I can see ahead and even from here I can see that the road is impassable. You lied to me! You were lying all the time, and Andy was right."

Matlock grinned. "You just forget that smart cowboy," he said. "I'll just take you folks to my place till we get the wagon fixed and the road cleaned."

"I'll not set foot on your place!" she flared. "I'll take a horse and go back and get Andy."

"The hell you will." Matlock snarled. "You'll go to my place like I said."

In the wagon, Andy could see Mrs. Cox's white, pain wracked face, and she was plainly frightened. Marion backed away as Matlock came forward, a grin on his thick lips. "Now you just calm down, Marion honey. I figure we will get wed. I need me a wife to cook and keep house and such!"

"I'll never marry you!" Marion said angrily.

"You will," Matlock said. "How about a kiss to seal the bargain? I got a hankering to kiss them pretty red lips! Come on, honey!"

Andy stepped out, the sixshooter in his hand. "Maybe you'd like a kiss about the size of a forty-four bullet, Matlock!"

Matlock whirled, hand halfway to his pistol. Marion screamed, "Andy!" and the way her face lit up started the ache in Andy's wishbone again.

"Thought I'd ride up here," Andy said, "to see how you folks were making out."

"Oh, Andy, please forgive me," Marion cried. "He was lying all the time."

"A habit of his," Andy said. He jiggled his gunbarrel. "Drop your belt, Matlock." Matlock was stealing glances upward toward the pass entrance and Andy grinned. "You can quit looking for Devore, Matlock. I found him staked out there with a rifle. He's wrapped up like a Christmas package."

"I'll have the law on you!" Matlock snarled as he unbuckled his gunbelt. Suddenly he hurled the belt and gun full at Andy's face.

Andy dodged, the belt, heavy with shell and pistol, scraped off his hat, and bandage and sent a blaze of pain through his wounded head. Matlock charged with a bellow of rage.

Matlock's swinging fist caught Andy's wrist and send his gun skittering. A fist slammed into his belly and knocked the wind out of him, and he fell. Matlock jumped on him. Andy turned, lifting a chapclad knee and turned the boots aside. Matlock fell and Andy dived on him, fists swinging.

Andy smashed a fist to Matlock's jaw, then twisted as the rancher brought a knee upward for his belly. Andy brought his elbow around and felt the crunch against Matlock's nose and the man bawled with pain. Andy slammed a fist against his jaw, Matlock rolled away, then went for his gun. Andy went after him.

Matlock got his gun and flopped over to bring it to bear. Andy drove a boot at the gun and saw it sail away. Raging, Andy slammed into Matlock, hammering slugging fists into him. Then a solid jolt to Matlock's jaw and the rancher hung groggily, propped on braced arms. Still mad, Andy measured and swung and his arm went numb to the shoulder. But Matlock was lifted, and flung on his back, out cold.

Marion came running. "Andy, are you hurt? That ruffian tried to kill you!"

Andy hugged her and she didn't seem to mind, in fact she appeared to like it. Andy kissed her, and he was certain she liked that too. He kissed her again.

"Can't kill an old Sacatone outlaw," he said grinning. "I got a few words to say to him when he comes to, and I'll be willing to bet we won't have old Matlock for a neighbor."

"Oh, Andy," she said, and Andy kissed her again.

Later, Andy said, "A man in my responsible position needs a wife. Now you wouldn't want me going around here kissing another woman, besides my wife, would you?"

Marion's smile was a lovely thing to see.

"I sure wouldn't," she said.

MOVE OUT OR FIGHT

(Concluded from page 82)

could. I'm going to marry a farmer's daughter—if she'll have me."

"I think she will," Mary said.

"What about Ben and Joel?" Francie asked quickly.

She knew her face was a flaming red, and she was a little breathless.

"I'll ride down to father's camp tomorrow and talk to him about Ben and Joel." Ray said. "He can send a message to the sheriff and have them released. But about you and me—"

"Come on inside," Francie said. "Your face needs attention. We'll talk about you and me later on."

She was smiling now. She felt very sure of herself, very confident. She didn't know exactly how the future would work out but she was sure it would be good for the whole family.

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RUN NO MORE

By CHAD COLEMAN

Jess had forsaken killing long ago, but the day he saw contempt in his son's eyes was the day he stopped running from a gunfight

THE sun was a hot iron, laying it's weight on the back of his neck, across his wide, bowed shoulders. Dust puffed up in little jets beneath the shuffling feet of his pony, and unconsciously he checked the position of the two men flanking him as they rode down the single narrow street of the town. Old Ben, on his left, gave him small cause for concern. This was as familiar a pattern to Ben as it was to him.

It seemed for a moment that Ben had always been there, riding slightly behind him, his horse's nose just even with his knee, protecting his left side. The graveyard side. As well trained as Brown Jug was he might fling up his head at the sound of a shot, and then for just a moment a man standing on the ground in front and to the left of him might be out of sight. A short time, but long enough for a well aimed gun to knock him out of the saddle. Ben Tatum would take care of that man—Jess had been through too many fights with his old compadre to doubt him now.

A small frown wrinkled Jess' forehead as he glanced at the boy riding on his right hand. He had Jess' great raw-boned frame, the big shoulders, the long fingered hands.

"Max says if you have any objections to register, he'll be waiting in Dragoon."

But instead of the hawk-nosed, granite hard face of his father, the boy had his mother's features—sensitive, vulnerable. A dreamer's face, a thinker's face. And it was because Jim was so much like his mother that Jess was here now.

Far down the street ahead of him Jess saw the small group of men waiting for him, their backs against the hitch-rail in front of the Sundown Saloon. He'd already made them out to be five, picked the heavy set figure in the middle as the one to deal with, and dismissed them for the time being.

It was the blank, black windows above the saloon that caused his gaze to sharpen and hold, but so far there had been no telltale shadows there, no flashing from blued steel. The whole town lay caught up in a silence so deep he could hear the dust plopping under the horses' hooves. The dirty, false fronted buildings crouched about them like a giant tiger waiting still and silent, sure of its prey that now was riding into its great yawning jaws.

They had been fixing the water trough at the ranch, he and Jim and Old Ben when they'd seen the rider coming toward them. The rolling dust had heralded his approach from a long distance, and the push of old memories behind him Ben had moved to the gun belt he'd hung on the corral fence.

"Trouble coming," he said briefly, settling the heavy gun about his waist.

Jess straightened, his gaze leaving the spiralling dust to look about him. Desert stretched in every direction from the mesquite brush corral they'd just finished building. A gray-green land, harsh and forbidding under the Arizona sun, merciless to those who tried to fight it, but unexpectedly bountiful to those who knew it and worked with it.

"Seems like this is a big enough country for everybody," Jess murmured.

His glance touched the 'dobe hut standing under the cottonwoods. Near it a small patch of green, carefully fenced against the gaunt cattle roaming the brush, gave promise of largess for the table in the near future.

Mary had worked hard on that small garden, ditching water from the little stream, fighting insects and rodents, nursing it through the hot days. It would hurt her to have to leave it now. Seemed like everytime Mary had her garden growing good some neighbor decided he needed their room more than their company and they'd had to move on.

His gaze rested for a while on the tall blue crags of the distant mountains. How cool and quiet they seemed. Why couldn't men be more like that instead of forever pushing and shoving, trying to grow bigger and stronger? Then to find at the last that they weren't so much after all, just a shadow on the desert for a short while, then nothing.

Jess eased his long frame into a squat in the meager shade of the brush corral and carefully rolled a smoke. He felt his boy's worried glance pulling at him, but the brown quirley shaping in his fingers held all his attention until the oncoming rider was pulling his blowing horse to a stop by the corral.

MAX STEEN sent me by to give the word, Staley. Seems that he needs this watering hole and he don't want you camping here. Says to tell you to move on."

The man sitting the lathered roan was a burly puncher, sun-blackened and tough, one of the Flying V's large crew. He sat his horse loosely, yet with every muscle ready, his glance resting longest on Old Ben. The kid hadn't been packing his gun long enough to be any threat and his old man didn't even pack an iron, but the thin oldster with the twin irons looked like he'd ridden some twisty trails in his time.

"We filed on this land right and proper," Jess said mildly. "Seems to me Mr. Steen has more land than cattle and I don't quite see his need for this little bit here."

"I don't give a damn how it seems to you, fellow," the puncher said bluntly. "Max says if you got any objections to register, he'll be waiting in Dragoon. If you ain't there by sundown, he'll figure

that you ain't coming and we'll be pushing cattle this way come sunup."

Jess straightened his rawhide-tough body and rubbed his hands slowly over his hips. It wasn't near as hard to take this kind of talk now as it had been twenty years ago. Then those same hands would have been reaching for the black butts of his .45's but now—

He turned heavily and almost bumped into his son. The boy was picking up their tools and putting them into a gunny sack. He glanced briefly at his father then quietly went on with his work. Jess stopped still in his tracks and looked at him, while his mind reeled under the shock he'd just had. That look on Jim's face!

All the boy's life he'd taught him, trained him, tried to make a good man out of him and now, for just a moment the curtain had been lifted and he'd seen into the boy's soul. He had to force his mind to it, but he couldn't escape it, for he'd seen contempt there, contempt of a boy for a father he thought was a coward.

Jim, Jim, it's for you, Son, Jess prayed silently, it's for you that I've been running all these years. I've tried to keep you out of it. The gunfighting, the trouble over range, the crooked trails. But even as the thoughts raced through his mind he suddenly knew it was no use. A man had to stand on his feet with his shoulders back and his neck braced, else he wasn't a man.

Look too long at the ground and you'd forget there was a sky. Watch too long over your shoulder and you'd quit looking ahead. Comes a time a man can't run any more—and stay a man. Jess was suddenly afraid, afraid he'd lost the boy that was his whole life, his reason for being. In sudden decision he straightened his bent shoulders.

"Ain't no sense in putting all those things away, Jim," he said mildly. "Shouldn't take too long to ride into town and get this little matter straightened out, then we can finish this tank before sundown."

"You ride back to town, friend, and tell your boss we'll be in directly. Tell him the three of us will be in, me and Ben here —and my son, Jim!"

In the house, Mary stood behind him and pleated her apron between nervous fingers as sunlight reflected from the barrel of one of his heavy guns.

"It's not many days ride to California, Jess," she said, not pleading with him, but just stating a fact in her gentle, low voice.

"It's no use, Mary," Jess said, standing up and settling the wide belt about his narrow hips. God, but it felt good to have those twin weights on his thighs again. It put iron in his spine, made his feet light so that he stepped catlike across the single room of their home.

"The boy is about run out. I swore I'd never wear these again, but there was a lot I didn't know then that I know now. A man's got to fight for what's his—and I've never let Jim do that. If I gave in one more time, I'd break his spirit. We wouldn't want that, Mary."

"No," she murmured, coming up close against him. "No," she repeated, then suddenly clutched his arm and pushed herself hard against him. He looked down at her slim body, the gentle, still pretty face, the soft brown hair with just a hint of grey in it.

"Jim can handle a gun, well enough. At best I've had enough sense to train him in that. And Ben's sided me in more trouble than I've even told you about. Ain't none better in a fight than Old Ben."

"But you, Jess, it's been twenty years since you've had your guns on!"

"I've kept my hand in," Jess said, embarrassed. "Times when nobody was about, I've kept in practice." Then with a flash of bravado, reminiscent of the man she had married, he said, "There isn't a man, anywhere, that can beat Jess Staley to his gun!"

"Except maybe—just maybe, Curley Bill." Mary smiled mistily at him, sharing an ancient joke that these two held between them.

"Except maybe Curley Bill," Jess said

smiling back. And for a moment his old partner was clear before his eyes, and he remembered the good times they'd had when their names had been enough to cause their enemies to shake in fear and promptly leave the country—if given time.

JIM and Ben had ridden up with the horses and Jess had raised his hand in solemn tribute to the slim figure standing in the doorway watching him ride away.

"How do you want to do it, Jess? Go past them, then pull in direct in front of them?" Ben's dry, emotionless voice jerked Jess back to the hot dusty street and he saw with some surprise that they were almost on the little group watching them.

"Why, that's as good as any, I reckon," Jess said. "Think you can drop back enough to watch the windows, as well as your boys, Ben?"

"I had that figured."

"Good. Jim, you pull back alongside Ben, and don't do nothing 'till you see me move. Then take that man furthest on your side. Don't pull any higher than you have to—just clearing leather, you'll get him in the guts. If your horse spooks jump him straight ahead or to the right—don't get in between me and that short feller."

"Got ya, Dad." Something in the way the boy said it made Jess slant a quick look at him. There was a smile on Jim's face and in it Jess read pride and admiration there, mixed in with love for his father. There was fear there too, but only the normal alerting fear of a man going into a fight—not panicky, shameful fear.

It's not too late, the boy will be all right, Jess thought exultantly. A roaring joy filled his soul so great it was almost painful, making his fingers tingle and chills run up and down his poker-straight backbone.

"Now!" he said. Like one the three horses pivoted and faced the knot of men at the rail. There were five men there, just as Jess had counted, but Jess only saw one. Short and broad, with shoulders wide enough for two men, he dominated the men about him until they paled into insignificance. A single gun, belted low on his left side, swung butt forward, and this for a moment caught Jess' eye, then he looked upward and locked a hard glance with the other man.

"The name's Staley," he said. "One of your riders said you wanted to have a little talk with me."

The short man grunted and spat a stream of brown juice into the dust ahead of him.

"You're a goddamn liar!" he stated calmly. "My rider told you to move off that spring. If you were coming in to see me, it wasn't to talk.

Jess smiled meagerly. The words were coldly calculated to anger him, tighten his muscles, slow down his draw. But he'd used that trick too many times himself to be drawn into it.

"Why, as for that," he murmured, "I'll tell you here and now, that spring is mine and I aim to stay there from now on!"

It was on the line now, the play was made. There was no backing up from this point on, and all the outside world became a dim place to Jess, the only bright clear figure was that squat powerful man in front of him. Jess felt the tension building all about him even as he marked his target.

The first bullet in the guts, the next right there below that Bull Durham tag hanging out of the checkered shirt pocket. A chewing man carrying the makin's? Even as the thoughts raced through his mind Jess saw the man's left hand go up to scuff his hat back on his close-cropped, curly gray hair while his right hand crept up to his shirt pocket in what seemed like a casual move towards building a smoke.

Only Jess knew how close a thing it was going to be now, and without thinking, the only words that might save them all came unbidden to his lips.

"I've given you your choice, friend, and now it's up to you. Either fork your pony

and ride out as a friend, or jerk your iron and ride out on a shutter."

For a long second then he felt a bottomless despair when he thought he had failed. Then he saw the man's hand stop in it's upward creeping, saw his eyes leave him for a moment to rest on Ben next to him then come back to gaze closely at him.

Suddenly, a small frown was wiped between the man's heavy brows and the faintest trace of a smile relaxed the set of his lips.

Steen pursed his lips and squirted a thin stream of tobacco into the dust at his feet, while his right hand went on up to lift his hat so he could scratch his head in thought.

"Why, then," he said after what seemed an endless time, "if yore so determined to stay, I reckon the country's big enough for both of us. If you can spare the time I'll buy the drinks. I've been looking for a neighbor that speaks my language."

His accent fell heavily on the last words, and as Jess swung from his horse he saw old Ben's eyes light up in recognition. Curley Bill had changed in looks in the last twenty years, but no gunfighter ever changes his pattern.

CUSTER'S LAST MAN

HISTORY tells with proper reverence the story of General George Armstrong Custer, his magnificent stand at the Little Big Horn and of his death at the hands of the Sioux along with 264 men of the Seventh U. S. Cavalry regiment on June 25, 1876.

But there was another man, one whose name we have sought in vain in the general accounts of the massacre—the man who scouted the wild Montana territory that day—the man who failed to tell Custer that he was approaching the main body of Sioux instead of only a raiding party.

His face does not appear in the paintings that show the lurid details of the massacre. His name is not in the hero columns of a child's history book; but wherever the ghosts of fighting men gather, whenever they swap yarns by a sputtering campfire high over the tumbling clouds, the name of "Lonesome" Charley Reynolds will be spoken with awe, for he was Custer's last man.

Strangely enough, Lonesome Charley was the one man who, by all means, should not have been along on the ill-fated expedition. He was sick, hardly able to carry a gun—much less fight for his life and the lives of others. Yet, there he was at the end. Lonesome Charley was Custer's chief guide.

It was on the steamer, "Far West," that his illness was seriously noted. The ship's captain, Grant Marsh, advised him to stay aboard, to let the rest of the Seventh Cavalry disembark for the expedition. But Lonesome Charley would have none of this advice.

"I've waited and prepared for this expedition for two years," he said. "I'd rather be dead than miss it."

And he meant just that. When the Seventh Cavalry reached the junction of the Big Horn and Little Big Horn rivers, Lonesome Charley was sent out ahead to scout the area. He never made it back, but no news was good to Custer.

Even as the long, thin notes of a cavalry bugle signaled Custer's charge, Lonesome Charley was frantically digging in to fight off the warriors of Crazy Horse.

The artists have painted the battle scene, the historians have recorded the deeds of Custer and his men; and long after the smoke and dust had settled, long after General Terry's troops had scuffed over the rubble, someone stumbled upon the arrow-torn and shattered body of Lonesome Charley Reynolds—far ahead and away from the main battle scene.

He couldn't warn Custer or stop the charge for the simple reason that he'd been completely smothered by the Sioux. Terry's soldiers counted 60 empty cartridges that Lonesome Charley had fired. And nearly as many members of the Sioux nation were strewn about—nearly 60, mind you—their arms and legs askew, eyes wide open in the shocked surprise of meeting death by a leaden slug from a rifle.

Custer's last man? They say he was—wherever the ghosts of fighting men gather, wherever they swap yarns by a sputtering campfire high over the tumbling clouds—that was Lonesome Charley Reynolds. ——*Robert B. Martin*

CALIFORNIA'S PIRATE RUSTLER

By RICHARD H. DILLON

Killer, robber, rustler, pirate,
Juan Flores blazed his
trail with blood

CALIFORNIA has never had the history of cattlemen's wars which certain other Western states have enjoyed—states like Arizona, Texas and Wyoming. However, the Golden State did have a range war, probably the only one in California's history, during the 1850's. And it was a humdinger.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the whole affair is that the chief of the biggest gang of stock rustlers to ever prey on the state's cattle industry was also, at least technically, a pirate. Juan Flores, the king of California rustlers, had gone bad at an early age and was caught and sent to San Quentin Prison. When he joined in an attempted prison break which failed, he and a hundred other men were placed under special descipline.

The failure didn't faze Flores. He struck up a friendship with a Shasta County robber named "Red Horse" Webster, and the two men led another break in the fall of 1856. The prisoners assaulted a ship which was unloading bricks at the wharf on Point San Quentin. The guards fired on the rioters with pistols and rifles, but Flores and Webster seized the brig and overpowered the crew.

Although neither Flores nor Red Horse knew anything about ships, they managed to cast off, set a sail and move the vessel out into San Pablo Bay. Here they came under the fire of the prison artillery battery. The guards sent a heavy fire at the brig from a six-pounder and a twelve-pound howitzer. The San Francisco Bay pirates made it safely through the barrage, however, landed on the Contra Costa shore and disappeared.

Army of Rustlers

Juan Flores showed up suddenly, far to the south, in San Luis Obispo. Here he enlisted Andrés Fontes as a recruit for his gang of rustlers. Fontes was a young cutthroat who bore a grudge against Sheriff James R. Barton of Los Angeles. The law officer had sent Fontes to prison when he was eighteen years old. Fontes always claimed that it was on a trumped-up charge, and had sworn to kill Barton.

Flores ran his gang like an army. He carried on large-scale raids on homes, ranches, stores and even towns. When one hard-headed German stubbornly refused to pay a ransom for his life, Flores hauled him right into the plaza of San Juan Capistrano and shot him for what he called "treason."

California's only range war was touched off by a young Los Angeles teamster, Garnet Hardy. He was in San Juan Capistrano, delivering goods to a merchant, when the Flores gang began to raid around the town. Hardy was warned not to try to make the return trip to Los Angeles alone if he prized his fine team of horses—and his life.

Garnet Hardy was no coward, but neither was he a fool. He got a note off to his brother Alfred in Los Angeles. Alfred Hardy took the matter up with Sheriff Barton, the popular one-time Missouri carpenter, and they arranged to muster a posse consisting of six men, including themselves. A seventh man, an unarmed ex-vaquero, agreed to serve as a guide.

Barton asked one of Harry Love's California Rangers, a man named Lyon, to join the posse, but he refused. Lyon warned the Sheriff that a fifty-man force would be necessary to take Flores.

The posse left town on the same day that Flores was raiding the store of a Pole and looting two homes. They killed the storekeeper, Charles Flughardt, and forced his assistant to bring them supper, which they ate on the store counter with Flughardt's corpse on the floor at their feet. They finished up the day by robbing Manuel Garcia's store, the proprietor fleeing for his life.

One-Sided Battle

The next morning Barton and his posse reached Don José Sepulveda's ranch, where the Mexican cowboys told them the cattle thieves and robbers of Flores' gang were fifty strong. Barton laughed off their warning, but they made the sign of the cross as he and his men galloped off.

As the posse arrived at a spur of the San Joaquin Ranch Mountains they saw a horseman galloping across the plain a mile away. Little and Baker, two members of the posse, rode after him but wheeled their animals after going a quarter of a mile and retreated.

Barton saw why they had turned back

as twenty mounted men streamed from ambush in the arroyos. He was shooting even before he heard his guide's frantic cry: "Those are the robbers! Shoot them!"

Barton and his men spurred their horses forward, but Baker and Little were shot out of their saddles before they could reach them. Two of the robbers dropped before Barton came face to face with his old enemy, Andrés Fontes, who shouted, "Damn you, I've got you now!"

Barton fired as he replied, "I reckon I've got you, too." Both men fell, Fontes wounded and Barton dead.

Another posseman, Daley, found himself cut off from the rest and turned to ride for safety, but his mule was easily overtaken and he was shot down. Alfred Hardy had lost his pistol and Alexander, the only other member of the posse still alive, was out of bullets, so the two men decided to run for it.

The bandits chased them for twelve miles but gave up as they reached the Sepulveda Ranch. From there Hardy and Alexander brought word of the massacre to Los Angeles and El Monte. Within two hours forty well-armed men were in the saddle in pursuit of Flores, but they found nothing except the four corpses, each with a coup de grace shot through the right eye. The unarmed Mexican guide had apparently escaped, too, and must have fled at the outset of the fight.

A leading rancher, Don Andrés Pico, organized a party of fifty-one dragoons, armed with the wicked California lances which had whipped Kearny's army into retreat at the Battle of San Pascual a decade earlier. Joining him were Indian auxiliaries under Captain Manuelito who guarded the mountain passes against outlaws.

Other Indians were sent to spy out Flores' camp. The spies found his camp and contacted one of the bandits, Chino Varelas, who agreed to sell Flores out. Flores saw the small army approaching, however, and retreated deeper into the mountains, driving Chino before him at gun point. The firing, at long distance, had no effect on either group.

A Texas lawyer, Bethel Coopwood, and a Dr. Gentry led another force in the field against Flores. While Pico captured one of the bandits and the informer, Chino Varelas, Coopwood and Gentry trapped Flores himself in a cave. After a brisk gunfight, in which one of the pursuers was wounded, Flores and his men surrendered. They were taken to Don Teodocio Yorba's ranch to await the arrival of Pico who was, in effect, a sort of chief of combined operations.

Capture and Escape

Around midnight, the prisoners escaped their ropes and guards. When Pico learned that Flores had escaped, he took no chances with his own prisoners and hanged them on the spot. The parties split up again and combed the mountains in what resembled a wartime campaign.

For eleven days the manhunt went on, with one hundred and nineteen men in the companies. Only two men were wounded and two horses killed in Pico's skillfully managed campaign. He supplied sixty horses and Sepulveda furnished beef cattle and another band of horses. Troops from Fort Tejón now joined Pico's forces.

The end of the chase was unspectacular compared to the fireworks that had gone before. On Tuesday, February 3, 1857, two soldiers at Simi Ranch seized a mysterious, unarmed horseman who claimed to be Juan Gonzales Sánchez of Mission San Fernando. He was identified as Flores and held under heavy guard.

When the notorious prisoner arrived in Los Angeles he was cool and tough, although he had been accidentally wounded in the thigh by his own pistol as he leaped down a mountain slope. When he saw the mob outside the jail his courage evaporated, however, and he begged for protection.

Fifty-two rustlers and murderers had been rounded up by the combined forces under Pico, and eleven were executed. Flores himself was taken from jail and marched to a scaffold. Guarding him were Captain Twist's Company and Captain Fargot's French Company.

An eye-witness described Flores: "He was a young man, about twenty-two years of age, and of pleasing countenance. There was nothing in his appearance to indicate the formidable bandit which he proved to be."

Horace Bell sized Flores up in different fashion.

He said that while Flores was "young, lithe and graceful—a beautiful figure in a *fandango*—his eyes were neither black, gray nor blue, but something of each. They resembled those of the owl—always moving, watchful and wary. They were the most cruel and vindictive eyes ever set in human head."

The Last to Die

The one remaining *bandido* of importance who reigned after Flores was his lieutenant, Pancho Daniel. Encarnación Berryessa had been hanged but was cut down by friends who gave him artificial respiration and actually kept him alive. He went on to a new career of rustling until he was hanged again, this time for keeps.

Andrés Fontes, the wounded killer of Sheriff Barton, fled to Baja, California, where he was murdered by his partner, Salomón Pico.

The gang had broken up when its pirate chief was trapped, but Pancho Daniel kept the memory of the band alive. He was captured near San José in January 1858, sent to prison and released on bail. Three trials were attempted but each time he got off.

Finally, a change of venue was ordered —to transfer Daniel's case from Los Angeles County to Santa Barbara County— and it began to look like the last of Flores' gang, and the last of Barton's murderers, would get off scot free.

Twenty citizens speedily formed a Vigilance committee to thwart this move to save Daniel, however. They overpowered the jailer, seized Pancho Daniel and unceremoniously strung him up in the gateway to the jail yard.

Peace and quiet did not come immediately to California after the deaths of Flores and Daniel, but in a sense the frontier days ended there with the great manhunt and range war of 1857—a campaign started by a simple act of piracy on San Francisco Bay.

THE IRON FIST

(Concluded from page 48)

would appear that the payroll messengers had jumped train with the money. That's why he went to a lot of pains to make sure Ed Minik's body was never found."

"Ramsey's getting away fouled him up then," Soltight muttered. He shook his head. "Never figgered Doc for anything but a mild, harmless man. Didn't seem to care for money—didn't look like the kind who'd hurt a fly."

Jim shrugged. "You can't always tell about a killer, Bill." He turned to the door. Goldy was waiting for him at the rack in front of the sheriff's office.

The job here was finished, a long trail lay ahead.

"Just a minute, Jim!" The sheriff's voice sounded ominous. Hatfield turned. He saw the gun in the sheriff's gnarled fist, levelled steadily at him.

"I got orders!" the sheriff said grimly. "To keep you here."

Jim frowned. "Keep me here?"

Sheriff Soltight's seamed face broke into a grin.

"Yeah, orders from Rick and Laura— and Johnny Cruze. They want you here for the wedding. Johnny says if I'm going to give my daughter away, then he wants you as his best man."

Jim grinned. "Orders are orders, Bill. I'll stay!"

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The GAMBLE

By Richard Eamer

Dying would be almost a pleasure, Sheriff Jim Denzler felt, for the beautiful, raven-haired gal from Texas

IT WAS early afternoon as Sheriff Jim Denzler watched the wagon come slowly up Fort Bragg's main drag. Narrowing his eyes against the glare of the late-summer sun, an appreciative grin spread across his sunburnt features. There were two people in the wagon, a man and a woman, but even at a distance he could see enough to ignore the man.

The woman was a beauty, sitting ramrod-straight on the hard spring seat, her hands folded in her lap. She was wearing a faded gingham dress, plain as the prairie, yet the full bosom and the soft curve of her shoulders were more alluring to Denzler than all the satins and laces of the DaGuerre House's girls.

But it was her face, a warm mixture of pink and brown, that held the sheriff's gaze with an almost hypnotic power. She had a short, straight nose over the softest, pinkest lips Denzler had ever seen. The wide set of her lupine-blue eyes and the breadth of her smooth forehead was softened by the warm curve of her cheek. Her raven-black hair, under the shield of a poke-bonnet, was pulled back over her ears and tied at her neck with a

red ribbon.

She was a picture—a picture completely out of place on the dusty drag of a Kansas cowtown.

As they neared, Denzler watched the men passing along the boardwalks stop to stare. The girl neither acknowledged their gaping nor seemed aloof from them. She was simply unaware.

She was watching the store windows, glancing from side to side. Denzler stood rooted to the edge of the walk, one hand hooked on his gun belt, the other nervously rolling an unlit stogie, as they drew abreast of him.

The girl glanced at the jailhouse, reading the sign on the porch roof, then the lupine-blue eyes dropped to Denzler, flickering over his face to the star on his chest, then back to his face, to his eyes. She nodded slightly, smiling, then looked away.

"Lord!" Denzler whispered to himself. "I don't believe it. No one could be that beautiful!" It was a struggle for him to draw a full breath. He felt as though someone had taken a couple of tight cinches around his chest with a wet rawhide riata.

He managed to glance at the man beside her, a long, lanky youth in worn levis and a weathered red shirt. Beside the girl he was nothing. Yet Denzler knew in his blond bigness he was a good-looking man.

THE wagon was loaded with household goods—chairs, a bed, a beaten desk, a couple barrels of smaller possessions. A handsome palomino was tied to the rear of the wagon, dragging on the lead rope, eating dust and unhappy about it.

"Moving north," the sheriff told himself. "Colorado, or Wyoming, maybe, or on up to Montana country."

He smiled bitterly, thinking how often he had promised himself to make that same journey, how many times he had put it off, telling himself how few good lawmen there were, how the lambs needed him to protect them from wolves like DaGuerre. But that was a poor lie, at best. He wasn't indispensable. Somebody would fill his boots close enough to pinch. The real reason he stayed on was that he knew it wouldn't be any good without somebody to share the trip. He wasn't the solitary type, yet he was particular enough to keep that somebody from being just anybody.

"Okay, Texas," he muttered. "Good luck to you, as if you haven't got it all now with a woman like that."

Then he frowned and the frown gave way to a tight grin. The boy was wearing a gun, hung low and thonged tight against his leg.

Denzler stepped into the dusty street and made for the wagon. One thing about being sheriff, he told himself wryly, you almost always could think up some halfway plausible excuse, in the name of the law, for doing exactly what you wanted to do. At least he would hear her voice. He made a bet with himself. It would be a low, melodic voice—the kind that makes the hair crawl along the back of a man's neck.

The girl saw him first and looked at him without curiosity. She laid a hand on the boy's arm. He turned, leaning forward to look past her. He saw Denzler and pulled the team of Morgans to a halt.

"Whoa up, there!" he called, kicking on the brake. He looked about him, as if to see what he could have done to brush the law.

The girl looked down at Denzler guilelessly, and he felt his face flush. He cleared his throat and managed to make his voice measured, deliberate.

"Sorry to bother you folks, but this is a no-gun town." He pointed at the boy's holstered pistol. "You'll either have to check it with me or cache it away until you leave town." His eyes moved furtively to the girl.

The boy frowed. "A man feels naked in a strange town without his gun."

"The very words of the men who made Fort Bragg famous," said Denzler, using his old cliche. "If you came up the road

from the Cimarron you probably saw their tombstones, up on the hill."

"I saw 'em," said the boy, his grin widening. "But I ain't no gunfighter. I'd be as like to shoot myself as anyone else, if it ever came to a fight."

"Then you can almost say I'm saving you from yourself," said Denzler.

"Could be," replied the blond one, "but without my hogleg hanging there I'd feel right off balance. Might fall down and break a leg. Besides, what if someone who don't check his iron pulls on me. I ain't too anxious to join them mavericks up on that hill."

"I carry about the only gun in this town. I'll keep my eye out for you."

"Yeah. But who watches you. I hear tell that you city sheriffs up here in Kansas ain't too partial to us Longhorns."

"John." That was all she said, but Denzler felt the hair crawl along the back of his neck.

The boy glanced at her, grinning. "Okay," he said, "I'll put it away." He drew the gun, an old Walker colt and dropped it on the wagon bed by his feet.

DENZLER smiled as he saw a massive pair of spurs on the boy's boots. The boy followed Denzler's glance and flushed.

"I don't usually straddle a wagon with spurs on," he said. "But these are special." He spun the rowels on one spur. The points were an inch long, at least, not the stubby Texas rowel. "Them is Californy spurs, and that's where we're headed, so I kinda wear 'em for luck."

Denzler shook his head. "Looks to me like you're long enough on luck." He smiled up at the girl, feeling his neck hot under her return smile. "Maybe I'll have to get me a pair of Californy spurs."

The girl leaned forward. "Oh, you can't buy luck. It has to be given to you. John's father left him those. Luck has to be a gift of love."

Denzler nodded. "I guess that leaves me out," he said. "The only things I ever got that way my daddy left me. A Sharps rifle and a Mexican rig saddle. But not much luck. The gun wouldn't shoot and the saddle got stolen." He laughed with them, then put his hand out. "I'm Jim Denzler, sheriff of these God-forsaken parts."

They took his hand in turn, and Denzler held her cool fingers longer than he should have, though it seemed like only a second to him.

The boy said, "We're Sue and John Strader, late of Texas, immediate of Kansas and soon of California. And the sooner the better."

"You got a good mite of country behind you," said Denzler. "And a sight more ahead of you, but I envy you."

Looking up at them he revised his first estimate of their ages. The boy was maybe eighteen, the girl a year younger. By Western standards that made him a youngster, her a woman.

"If you're staying overnight, the Palace is flossy, but Mrs. Kilgour's—one street over—is cheaper. The food's better, too."

"Thanks, but we're moving on, soon as I do a little business. Pleased to have met you, though, even if you did rob me of my iron." He kicked the brake off and Denzler stepped back.

Sue Strader smiled down at him again, showing the even whiteness of her teeth behind the soft lips, raising her hand in a small gesture. Denzler managed to smile and lift a hand in return, then he swung on his heel and strode rapidly to his office, stirring a small cloud of dust in his wake. Behind the door he let out an explosive breath, grabbed the cell keys off their hook and threw them at the far wall with all his strength.

Then he looked at his hands. They were shaking. "You are a damn fool," he told himself. "Twenty-six years old and acting like a moon-struck kid." Then he grinned and amended that thought. Thunderstruck was more like it. And over a married woman to boot.

IT WAS late afternoon before he stopped thinking about her, and when he did it was only for a short minute.

He moved restlessly around the office, reading old wanted posters, poking in drawers that hadn't drawn his attention in months, until he laughed at himself derisively.

"A big boy like you. Next thing you know you'll be skulking around town hoping to sneak looks at her, maybe riding up the Denver road to accidentally pass them as they leave." But as he was laughing, another part of him was seriously weighing those thoughts.

He shook his head, clapped his hat on it, and stomped purposefully down the length of Fort Bragg's main street to the stock yards.

Most of the corrals were yawning empty and there was a lonely feel to the yards. The spring drives were over and the last trickle of summer beeves had stopped early in the week. A motley collection of longhorns was waiting in the loading pens for the weekly train to Kansas City.

But the loneliness was what Denzler wanted. He drew a deep breath and methodically went about making a smoke. When he had lighted it, he climbed up and perched on the top rail, then sat staring moodily at the hoof-chopped, hay-strewn inner ground.

It was a familiar place to him. And at a familiar time. With the drives over, the town was settling down to eight months of peaceful stolidity. If ever he was to move on to that greener pasture, this was the time. He had told himself that for three years, ever since he had inherited the job on the violent death of Sheriff Stillman. But he had never even prepared to leave. He hated the idea of riding the trail alone.

He flicked the cigarette butt away from him and turned the other way on the railing, to watch the town. A few scattered horsemen moved listlessly down the street, and several bonneted women loaded a buckboard in front of Grimley's store. And then, farther up the street, in front of DaGuerre's, he saw the wagon. There was nobody in it.

A passing horseman hailed him. Denzler raised a hand. The rider was Clyde Mooney, owner of a good sized farm-ranch up the Denver road. Mooney turned his mount towards the corral.

"Sunning yourself?" he asked, his grim eyes sparkling.

Denzler grinned. "When I'm done on this side I'm going to turn over and cook the backside."

"I figured you'd seen her, too," said the rancher, laughing. "A corral fence is a good place to recover from that kind of shock."

"Think I'll recover?"

"Should," smiled Mooney. "Tougher on you than me, though. You're young and I'm older than hell. That doesn't help none when you look, but it helps you get your feet back on the ground, knowing you couldn't do a damn thing about it if you had the chance. Besides, I've been married close to thirty years." He patted Denzler's leg. "That's what you need, boy. You've been single too long. You ain't the lonely type."

"Not by choice, anyway," agreed Denzler glumly.

"You might at least mosey up to Frenchy's place," said Mooney, growing serious. "That man of hers is losing his shirt. He didn't look happy."

Denzler shook his head. "He said he had business."

"It's a business to some," said Mooney.

"Yeah." The sheriff glanced up the street at the wagon. "How much of his shirt has DaGuerre got?"

"A thousand, maybe. The kid's been trying everything. Faro, blackjack, roulette. His luck runs only one way—downhill."

Denzler slipped to the ground. He wiped the sweat off his nose and lips, staring thoughtfully up the street. Then he turned and looked up at Mooney.

"I guess I'll go watch," he said.

"You do that," agreed Mooney. "And come out to dinner next week. Thursday, say. If you can get her out of your mind by then and work up an appetite."

"I got an appetite," said Denzler.

Mooney laughed, reining away. "I know," he said. "But I don't mean that kind. "

DENZLER grinned after him, then, his face sobering, started up the street. Again he felt a tightness building up in him, but it was not over the beauty of the woman this time. This was a much older hurt, and it came from men like DaGuerre, men who did nothing for a living but take honest money from others who worked like slaves, and hid behind the law's skirts when their victims were unhappy.

"Some day," he had told himself, "someday I'll put a double cinch on them and squeeze till they scream. Then I'll drop an iron on them so all the world'll know them for the mavericks they are."

But DaGuerre all but ran the town, and Denzler knew that if he wasn't careful he would follow Sheriff Stillman to the hill. Stillman had once closed the DaGuerre House. In twenty-four hours it was open again, but Stillman hadn't been around to close it a second time. Bob Strang, DaGuerre's gunslick, had dropped him in a fight that had been fair only because Stillman had gone for his gun first. And now Strang, thin and pasty-faced, but faster with a gun than any man had a right to be, haunted Denzler.

Denzler had had his chances to take Strang, but he had carefully avoided them. He had been there when Stillman had been backed into a corner. The old sheriff had come out fighting, but it wasn't enough. Denzler doubted that he could add much to Stillman's try.

He stepped out of the ankle deep dust and stamped his boots on the boardwalk. Then he saw her, sitting on a bench in the shadows beneath the painted windows of the DaGuerre House. She was watching him gravely. When she saw him flush, she smiled gently.

Denzler swept off his hat, drumming it nervously against his leg. The tight, constricting band around his chest closed in again. When he stepped closer he saw the troubled shadows under the lupine-blue eyes.

"This is no place for you to be sitting, ma'am," he said. "This is a—a saloon and gambling house."

She nodded solemnly. "I know," she said, and Denzler's hair crawled again. "I'm waiting for my brother."

Denzler nodded nervously, glancing over the swinging doors at the dim interior of the DaGuerre House before her words caught him. He stared at her, not even trying to conceal the spread of his incredulous grin.

"Brother?" he repeated. "I figured—I mean—"

"That we were married?" She smiled.

Denzler nodded. "I remember something you said—about his daddy giving him those spurs. I guess I caught that to mean his daddy wasn't your daddy."

"He wasn't." She hesitated, a faraway look in her eyes like some one looking over years at something that was best forgotten. "My—my folks were killed by the Comanches right after the war. The Straders took me in."

"Oh," he said, feeling a pang of disappointment. "Then you're not blood relatives. Just traveling together."

An angry frown crossed her face. "I don't think I like the sound of that."

Denzler recoiled from her anger, cursing his clumsiness. "I didn't mean anything—except that I'm glad you're not married."

She raised her eyebrows. The turn of a smile touched her mouth, then a murmur of voices came through the doors. She stopped the smile and bit her lip in a harassed gesture.

"John's losing."

Denzler nodded. "I heard he was."

She looked at him closely. Denzler had the impression she was trying to see inside him, to see what kind of a man he was.

"This afternoon," she said, "after John went inside, I looked for you. I went to your office."

"Oh?" said the sheriff. "I'm sorry I wasn't there." Looking for me, he thought, and I was feeling sorry for myself on a corral railing. "I—I was walking."

She went on: "There was a man passing by. I asked him where you might be. He didn't know, but he offered to help me if he could." Her eyes were on Denzler's, as though trying to read some answer there. "When I told him what I wanted, he said he couldn't help me. He said that he couldn't help, and that you wouldn't."

"Help at what?"

"Stop this gambler from taking John's money." Her smile was gone. Her blue eyes were very sober. "This man I spoke to . . . he said DaGuerre owned you."

Denzler's mouth drew into a harsh line. He stepped towards the girl. "Who said that?" he demanded.

A softly cynical smile touched her lips. "You are big, aren't you?" she said.

Denzler stepped back, feeling a fool. She seemed so small standing there, her head tilted back to look up at his towering height. Small and alone, and perhaps looking for someone to trust, someone to accept the load of her burdens. He wanted to take her in his arms, but the clear look of disappointment on her face brought him up short.

HE SHOOK his head. "I think you've got this whole thing backwards. What DaGuerre is doing, the law says he can do. Nobody's making your brother gamble."

"He thinks he can win. He—"

"Nobody wins!" snapped Denzler harshly. "Not even the DaGuerres. Sooner or later they all run into some even more predatory professional or gun-quick tough and wind up in the gutter or on the hill. Every last one."

"John won before. When his father was alive. Four years ago. They trailed a herd north and John won a hundred dollars in DaGuerre's."

"During the big season! While he was

[Turn page]

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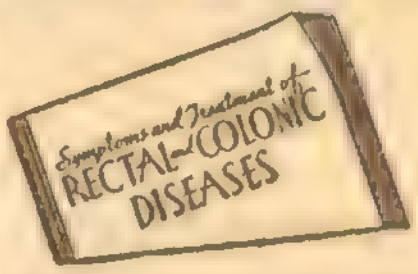

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winning his hundred, some other sucker was losing a thousand. But this is the thin part of the year. There aren't any other suckers."

"I know," she said, nodding her head slowly. "And so you let them take John."

"Nobody forced him in there!" He started to say more, but bit his words off. The phrases he had used so many times to other gambler's "widows" didn't seem to go with those searching blue eyes. "Look," he said. "I'll bring him out of there if that's what you want. I don't know how, but I'll bring him out."

She shook her head. "That won't do it. It's John's money, from his father's land. He can do what he wants with it. All I want is that there isn't any place like DaGuerre's to spend it in."

"That's all?" Denzler shook his head and laughed. "You want me to close DaGuerre's so your brother won't have any place to lose his shirt. Why don't you ask me to move the Cimarron so he won't get his feet wet if he decides to go wading?"

"But you could, couldn't you?"

"On what grounds? Gambling isn't illegal."

"The man I met said DaGuerre cheats. Does he?"

Denzler's smile faded. "Maybe . . . . Probably."

"And what do you do about it?" she asked sharply. "Protect him when some cheated waddie tries to take his shirt back?"

Denzler shook his head, though not at her. Her words were merely echoes of his own thoughts. "I'm here, waiting. When somebody comes to me with proof, real proof, that DaGuerre runs a crooked table I'll board him up quicker than summer rain. I'm waiting for that day."

"Just waiting?" she asked. "Don't you ever go looking for the proof? That's what I thought a lawman was for."

Denzler started to say something, but he held his words in. There was too much truth in what she said. Truth he had long recognized.

She shook her head. "I guess John was right—about Kansas sheriffs and people from Texas."

There was a shout from inside and she looked at Denzler with frightened eyes. Denzler moved swiftly to the swinging doors, looking in over the tops. There was a knot of men gathered around one of the tables. John Strader, his eyes intent on the table, was facing the doors. Across from him, his back to Denzler, was a white-shirted croupier. Half a dozen do-nothings pressed around the table. And a little to one side stood Louis DaGuerre in his fawn colored trousers and flowered frock coat.

Denzler pushed through the doors and stood with his back against them.

The game was shell and pea. Denzler shook his head, remembering Mooney's words. "The kid's trying everything. His luck runs only one way—downhill."

Lenny, the croupier, took a pile of bills from the table and put them in a drawer. "Again?" he asked.

Strader's face, glistening with sweat, was drawn white-taut at the mouth. It was a study in contrast to the excited, grinning faces around him, to the studied indifference of Lenny, to the cynical nonchalance of DaGuerre.

He nodded. "I think I catch it now," he said softly. "One more time." He drew a money belt from his shirt and laid it on the table. "For two thousand dollars. All or nothing."

Lenny glanced at DaGuerre. The gambler nodded, a lazy smile running across his pale face.

LENNY rolled the pea along the green felt, covering it with one of the shells, and began his manipulation, sliding the walunt shells over the table faster than an eye could follow. Denzler stopped watching him and looked at the others instead.

Strader was as tight as a rusted gun, veins standing out along his neck and hands. How much he had lost, Denzler had no idea, but he'd have been willing to bet that even if the boy won this time

he'd probably do no better than break even. And, of course, if he won, there'd be no stopping him.

The others were just the usual drift that was found in a saloon in the middle of an afternoon. But beyond them, leaning with his back to the bar, was Strang, nearly harmless appearing in a plain white shirt and a black string tie. He was watching the play with bored, slitted eyes.

One day, Denzler said silently, somebody's going to catch up with you, too. Fast as you are, someday you'll make that big mistake.

Denzler brought his eyes back to the table. With a start he noticed DaGuerre watching him. Denzler met his eyes and the gambler smiled and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, "Look how they beg me to take their money. Is this a fault of mine?"

Then Lenny stopped his hands and looked up. "Which one?" he asked.

A hush fell over the room and Strader drew a deep breath and burst out with an explosive laugh.

"I got you!" he yelled. "I never missed it!" He tapped one shell with a forefinger. "This one!"

Lenny smiled and raised the shell and there was only the dull green of the felt beneath it. The onlookers backed away from the table, watching mutely. Lenny shrugged and reached for the money.

Strader stared numbly for a second, then slowly raised his eyes to Lenny. His face turned dark red.

"No, damn you!" he roared. His hand darted inside his shirt and came out filled with the old Walker colt. He trained it on Lenny. "I was never wrong. You cheated! Lift them other shells! I say there's no pea under any of 'em."

Lenny grinned at him helplessly. "You ain't accusing me of cheating, are you, mister?"

"I'm calling you a cheat!" Strader thumbed back the hammer. "Raise them shells!"

"That'll cost you, cowboy," said Da-

[Turn page]

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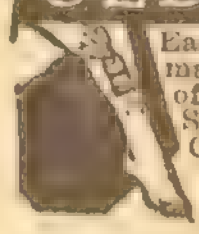

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Guerre softly, moving to Lenny's side. "If you want to see the bottom of those shells put up your money."

"There's my money," shouted the boy, pointing to the pile of greenbacks. "Raise 'em."

"That's no longer your money. Take some good advice and simmer down before you get hurt."

Strader looked around him quickly, stepping back. "You damn cheat. I'm calling you. Raise them shells!"

DaGuerre's mouth tightened. He started to speak, but Denzler stepped forward, holding up his hand.

"You're acting like a damn fool, cowboy," he said. "I thought I told you this is a no-gun town."

"Yeah," snapped Strader. "And I can see why. So no one can buck these cheats even when they rob him blind. Well, I ain't no damn fool. And I ain't going to take being cheated with no pleasant thank you."

To one side Denzler saw Strang lay his glass down unhurriedly and begin to move to his right, to get behind Strader. Denzler felt the tightness catch his throat. He had the sudden feeling he was being swept along by a current, being pushed into something he wasn't ready for, might never be ready for.

"I was watching," he said. "I didn't see anything wrong."

"I saw!" The boy's hand was white on the gun. "I chose the right shell, but there weren't no pea. There ain't no pea under any of those shells."

Denzler stepped towards the boy again, turning to Lenny. "How about that, Lenny?"

"He's crazy. I run an honest game. If he wants to see under them shells, it'll cost him, just like before."

"I ain't got a cent. You strapped me."

"It's clear, isn't it, Denzler?" asked DaGuerre suavely. "The world is full of hard losers." His eyes flitted to the bar and Strang, then back to the sheriff and the boy.

Denzler moved closer to Strader, but facing DaGuerre, to a point where he could watch Strang in the mirror over DaGuerre's shoulder.

"The way I look it," the sheriff began nonchalantly, "is—" He whipped suddenly into action, one hand darting out and seizing Strader's wrist, throwing the gun into the air as a shot crashed harmlessly into the rafters. With his other hand Denzler drew his own gun, slamming the barrel sharply across Strader's head. The boy dropped like a sack of meal.

DENZLER holstered his own gun, looking down at the boy. In the mirror he caught a look of amused disappointment on Strang's face.

DaGuerre nodded at him. "You're very fast, sheriff. You know how to handle these Texas toughs. Only sometimes I wonder who it is you protect. Us—or them?"

Denzler took a deep breath, looking at DaGuerre's mocking smile and, in the mirror, Strang's truculent gaze. Then he knew what had held him in Fort Bragg, and he decided.

"Need you wonder, DaGuerre?" he asked.

DaGuerre raised a sardonic brow. "Are you showing your fangs to me, sheriff?" He laughed shortly. "Take this fool away! I'll prefer charges."

Denzler nodded slowly, but he didn't move. "One thing at a time," he said. Then to Lenny, who was reaching for the pile of money, he snapped, "Don't do that, Lenny!"

A frown carried across DaGuerre's face. "What is it?"

"Right now," said Denzler carefully, smothering a surge of panic inside of him, "I'm investigating a charge by this Texas cowpoke. He said he was cheated. I know it was kind of an informal type of complaint, but worth it's weight. Lenny, let's see under those shells."

Lenny glanced at DaGuerre, then he grinned one-sidely. "Now, sheriff," he said, "you wouldn't be calling me a cheat, too, would you?"

"I might, Lenny," said Denzler. "I just might. Lift the shells, but first spread your fingers apart, wide apart. And lift 'em real easy like."

DaGuerre asked harshly, "What's got into you, Denzler? You're acting crazy. You can't come in here and do this."

"Yes, I can. I'm doing it."

"You might regret it," snapped DaGuerre. "After all, this man is a stranger, and I've got a little influence in this town, you know."

"The law's the same for all men, DaGuerre," said Denzler softly. "Something maybe I'm a little late in learning, but I've learned it. Save your influence. If there's no pea under one of those shells you'll need it."

"Be reasonable, Denzler," snapped DaGuerre. "I guarantee you there's a pea under those shells, but it's against rules to lift one without a bet. I can't change rules just because you get a bee in your bonnet."

"Lift 'em, Lenny," Denzler said quietly. "Now!" He seemed to watch Lenny, but his eyes were really looking past him, into the long garish mirror behind the bar, watching Strang.

DaGuerre shrugged, then he took his handkerchief from his breast pocket as though to mop his forehead.

Denzler ducked and whirled, drawing and firing as he spun.

Strang's shot tore the ceiling. The gunman took a single hesitant step forward, a puzzled look on his pale face, a small black hole in the center of his white shirt. Then he fell heavily.

Denzler hadn't even watched him fall. He whirled around again, his gun on DaGuerre, his face livid and drawn.

"Thank you, Louis," he said huskily. "You used that handkerchief trick once too often. It gave me just the jump I needed." He waited, but DaGuerre said nothing, his face a blank mask. "Now we'll have a look for the pea."

He raised the shells one at a time. There was nothing but blank felt. He

[Turn page]

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looked at Lenny, who reached in his fob-pocket, withdrew the pea, and rolled it across the table to Denzler.

Denzler picked it up, held it between his fingers. A little piece of nothing, he thought, but it had brought him the mistake he had been waiting for DaGuerre to make. And something more, something he had lost when he hadn't bucked Strang the first time he had had the chance. He thought of Sue Strader, then. She was looking through the doors, her face pale and tense, her hand at her throat. Denzler smiled at her. Maybe, he thought, with a little luck I might parlay this into something really important.

He reached over and picked up the money on the table, some four thousand dollars. "I'll keep this for the boy. It is his, isn't it, Louis?"

The gambler smiled resignedly and shrugged. "I told Strang you were a dangerous man. But he wouldn't listen."

"His kind never do," said Denzler, motioning him and Lenny towards the door with his gun.

WAITING impatiently by the open door, Denzler stared out at the dark windows of the DaGuerre House, indistinct in the bluish light of early evening. It was a sight he had long waited to see. But now that it was over, it wasn't enough.

He turned from the doorway and strode around the office, riffling through the same wanted posters, banging the same drawers he had fussed with earlier. Then from the cell block he heard Sue's voice, then Strader's.

Denzler stopped pacing, dull with relief. The boy had been out an hour. The blow on the head had been harder than Denzler had intended.

Doc Morgan came through the door from the cells. He looked at the sheriff sourly, without a trace of a smile, but there was a betraying crinkle around his eyes.

"If you were half the terror with some of these gunslicks we got around these parts as you are with poor Texan cowboys, this town just might be a decent place to live in."

"Is he all right?"

Doc sniffed. "Better than that Strang fellow. He didn't need me at all." He paused by the door. "This cowboy has just got a head that feels like all the longhorns in Texas stomped on it. He'll live. You can't hurt Texans by clubbing 'em on the head. You got to do something really serious, like steal their horse—or their sister."

Denzler grinned. "Always glad to oblige," he said.

"Yeah," said Doc. "I can see why." He went out, chuckling.

Denzler moved back into the cell block. Strader was sitting on the edge of a bunk in an open cell, his head in his hands. Sue Strader stood up, smiling warmly at Denzler.

Strader looked up, closing one eye and wincing, an ugly purple weal running across his forehead.

He grinned painfully.

"It's that Texan-hating sheriff," he drawled, holding out his hand. "I guess I got to say I'm obliged to you, even if you did crack my head wide open. But it seems to me a mighty funny way of saving a man's life, darn near stretching him out permanent-like."

"You seem pretty well recovered," Denzler said with a grin.

"Yeah? Well, if this head was sitting on your neck you might not be so ready with them thoughts." He put his head back in his hands.

Sue Strader laughed. "He's better than he'll admit. He's fishing for sympathy, and after almost throwing away his last peso on a silly dried pea."

Strader groaned. "Gambling! I'm reformed for life."

"You got company," said Denzler, glancing into the adjacent cell where DaGuerre and Lenny were sitting sullenly. "Unhappy company."

Denzler took Sue Strader by the arm, feeling certain of himself for the first time, and steered her out of the cell. He shut the door, locking Strader in.

"You three can pass the time together," he said, "sharing your new-found religion. "

Strader got to his feet. "Hey!" he yelled, wincing and grabbing his head. "What are you locking me in here for?"

"Remember when I stopped you on the street?" asked Denzler, still holding Sue's arm.

"Sure," said Strader. "When you come out to get a better look at Sue."

Denzler flushed and glanced at the girl. She was smiling, a soft red glow warming her brown cheeks.

Denzler began to grin.

"That's the time," he admitted. "I told you this was a no-gun town. When you pulled your colt in DaGuerre's you earned yourself thirty days free room and board on the City of Fort Bragg."

"Thirty days! What can I do in here for thirty days?"

"That's not the question," said Denzler smugly, looking at Sue. "The question is —what can I do with you in there for thirty days?" He looked back at Strader. "I don't suppose you'd like to lend me your daddy's lucky spurs."

Strader rattled the bars, groaning as he did so. "Why, you sneaky sidewinder!" he hollered, looking from Denzler to his sister, who were looking at each other. "Sis, I told you about these Kansas lawmen."

He reached through the bars and poked Denzler's arm. "Why, I'd no more lend you my daddy's spurs than I'd go gambling without a gun on me." He looked from one to the other.

"Besides, it don't look much like you'd need 'em, anyway."

Sue Strader stepped closer to Denzler, looking up at him.

"Some men make their own luck," she said softly, her lips parting in a caressing smile.

She slipped her hand under Denzler's elbow, resting it on his arm in a manner that told him, the luck he had made would last a lifetime.

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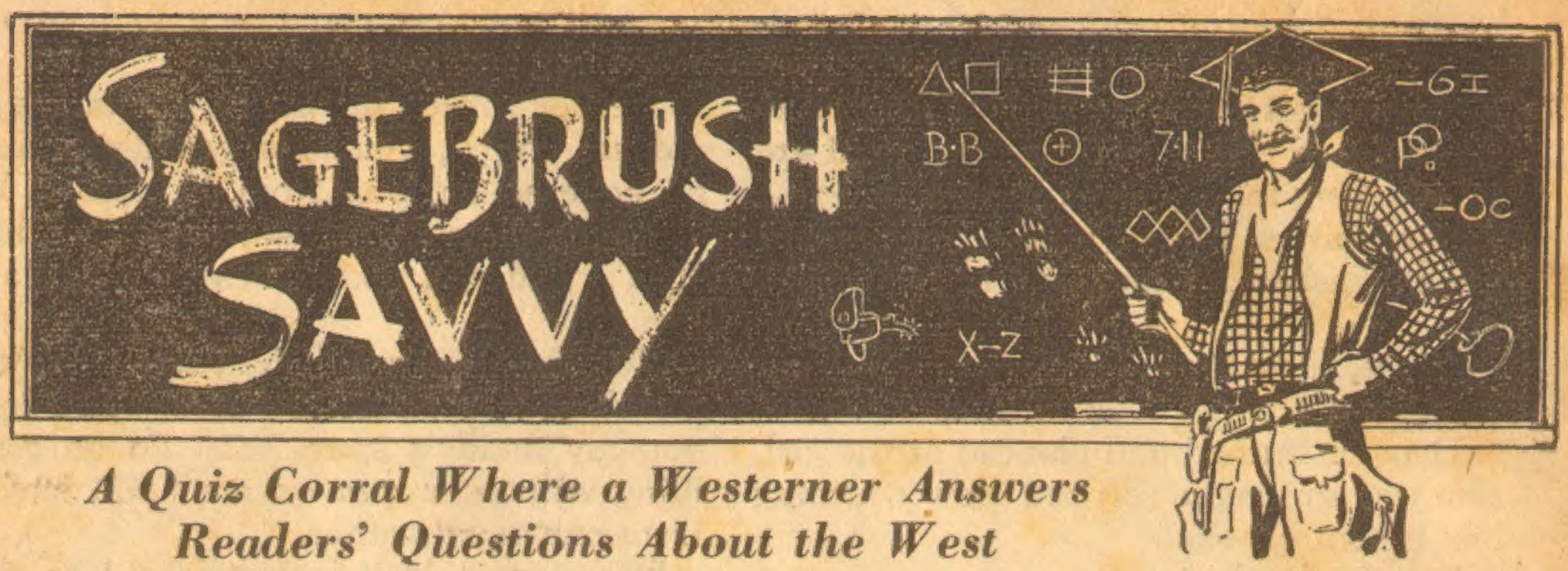


A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—I see the word "macho" in Western stories. My Spanish dictionary says it means "male", but that doesn't seem to fit.—K.B. (La.)

A.—"Male" is right for correct Spanish, but in the cowboy-Spanish lingo of the southwest a *macho* is a mule, particularly a mule whose sire was a burro.

Q.—I have often wondered about the meaning or origin of the name of the historic Texas cowtown called Mobeetie.—R.J.H. (Tex.)

A.—Mobeetie is an Indian word (Comanche, I think) meaning sweet water or pure water.

Q.—I would like to know something about the sect or secret society of Mexicans called Penitentes. Do they really whip themselves for their sins?—A.D.L. (Minn.)

A.—This is a religious order of Spanish-Americans, not Mexicans, chiefly in New Mexico, with a few members in adjoining states. Its full name is *Los Hermanos Penitentes de la Tercera Órden de San Francisco,* translated The Penitent Brothers of the Third order of St. Francis, but its members are generally spoken of simply as *Penitentes* (Pay-nee-TAYN-tace, commonly pronounced PennyTENteez). Yes, self-whipping is a part of the ritual of their Holy Week ceremonies, which also include carrying crosses up a Calvary and re-enactment of the Crucifixion. Until fairly recent years, both the self-whipping and the Crucifixion were severely realistic in the hill villages of northern New Mexico. Nowadays they are much less so. The Order is for men only, is devoutly religious, has no central organization, and there is no record of the total number of its membership. Meetings are held in small isolated lodge houses called *moradas* and the local leader of each *morada* is called *El Hermano Mayor* (The Elder Brother). Space forbids a more detailed description, but it should be said that most Penitentes are also good American citizens. Many of them are my own good friends and neighbors.

Q.—How much grass does a range cow eat?—E.E.V. (N.Y.)

A.—A grown cow animal will eat its own weight in grass in about seven days, if available, while growing animals eat somewhat more.

Q.—Which is correct for a citizen of Texas: Texan, Texian or Texican?—B.T.T. (Wash.)

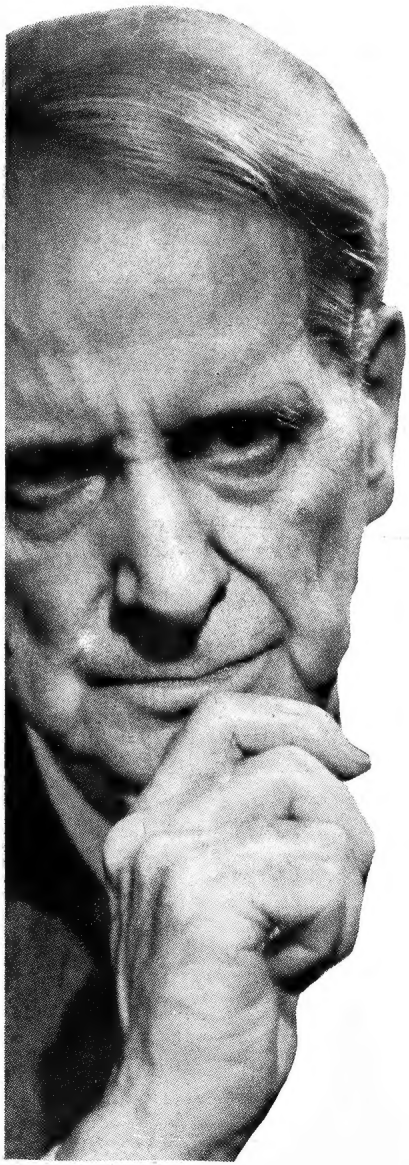
A.—Once fairly common, Texian and Texican are now rarely heard. Texan seems to be the generally accepted term today.

Q.—Who would you say was the greatest lawman or law officer of the old West?

A.—No one can truly say, for there were many whose courage, hardihood and gun-savvy was notable. To name just a few who, in my opinion, were tophands in that category, I would list Bill Tilghman, Jeff Milton, Charley Siringo, John Slaughter, Pat Garrett, Bat Masterson, Elfego Baca, Billy Breakenridge, Texas Ranger Captains John R. Hughes, Bill McDonald, L. H. McNelly, and Ranger Sergeant Jim Gillett. But of course there were plently more, and not every Westerner will agree with my choices.

—S. Omar Barker

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit to Surgery



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There is only one known cure . . . and that is surgical correction. Yet, for many, this relief must be denied or delayed for any one of a variety of reasons. It is to this group of unfortunate persons that this message is directed.

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The broad, flat pad is molded from firm, yet comfortable foam rubber, covered on the top by strong nylon mesh for cool comfort and complete washability.

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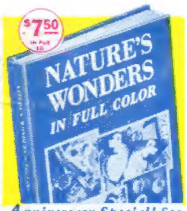

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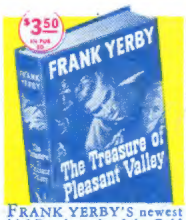

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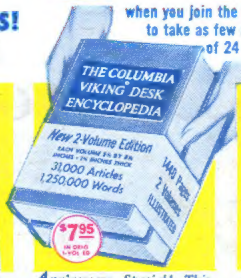

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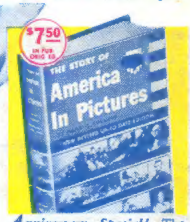

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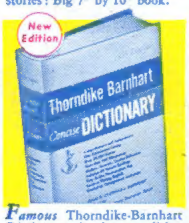

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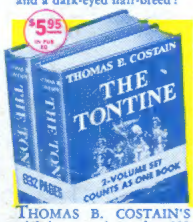

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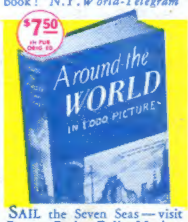

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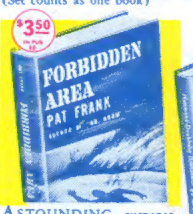

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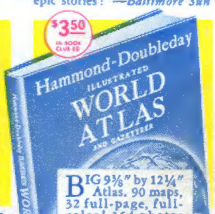

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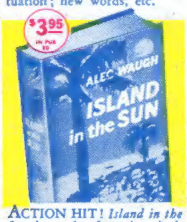

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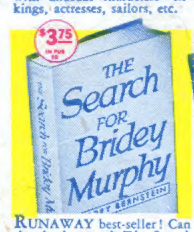

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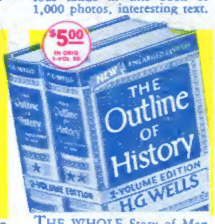

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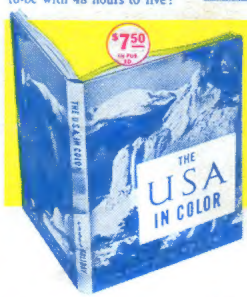

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